

7

THEATRE SPACES

When we attend the theatre, our experience begins in advance. Sometimes we read or hear reports of the play; we anticipate seeing a particular actress or actor; we buy tickets and make plans with friends to attend; and before the performance, we gather outside the theatre space with other members of the audience.

CREATING THE ENVIRONMENT

When we arrive inside a theatre building for a performance, we immediately take in the environment in which the event will occur. The atmosphere inside the space for a production has a great deal to do with our mood in approaching a performance, not only creating expectations about the event but conditioning the experience once it gets under way. As spectators, we have one feeling if we come into a formal setting, such as a picture-frame stage surrounded by carved gilt figures, with crystal chandeliers and red plush seats in the auditorium. We have quite a different feeling if we come into an old warehouse converted into a theatre, with bare brick walls, and a stage in the middle of the floor surrounded by folding chairs.

For many years people took the physical arrangement of theatres for granted. This was particularly true in the period when all houses were facsimiles of the Broadway theatre, with its proscenium, or picture-frame, stage. In the past half century, however, not only have people been exposed to other types of theatres; they have also become more aware of the importance of environment. Many experimental groups have deliberately made awareness of the environment a part of the experience.

An avant-garde production of Euripides's *The Bacchae*, called *Dionysus in 69*, by the Performance Group in New York, introduced the audience to the performance in a controlled manner. Spectators were not allowed into the theatre when they arrived but were made to line up on the street outside. The procedure is outlined by Victoria Strang in a book describing the production.

◀ STAGE SPACES: AN OUTDOOR THRUST STAGE

The Allen Pavilion at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival is a 1,200-seat theatre with an Elizabethan thrust stage. With the audience on three sides, this is one of the oldest and most popular configurations for a theatre performance space. The production shown here is Shakespeare's Love's Labour's Lost, directed by Kenneth Albers. (© T Charles Erickson)

The audience begins to assemble at around 7:45 P.M. They line up on Wooster Street below Greenwich Village. Sometimes the line goes up the block almost to the corner of Broome. On rainy nights, or during the coldest parts of the winter, the audience waits upstairs over the theater. The theater is a large space, some 50 by 40 and 20 feet high. At 8:15 the performance begins for the audience when the stage manager, Vickie May Strang, makes the following announcement. Inside the performers begin warming up their voices and bodies at 7:45.

Vickie: Ladies and gentlemen! May I have your attention, please. We are going to start letting you in now. You will be admitted to the theater one at a time, and if you're with someone you may be split up. But you can find each other again once you're inside. Take your time to explore the environment. It's a very interesting space, and there are all different kinds of places you can sit. We recommend going up high on the towers and platforms, or down underneath them. The password is "Go high or take cover." There is no smoking inside and no cameras. Thank you.¹

In an interview included in the book, Strang gave her own view of this procedure.

We let the public in one at a time. People on the queue outside the theater ask me why. I explain that this is a rite of initiation, a chance for each person to confront the environment alone, without comparing notes with friends. People are skeptical. Some few are angry. Many think it's a put-on. I must confess to a perverse pleasure in teasing people on a line. Many will come up and ask anxiously, "Has it already begun?" I say, "It begins before we let anybody in, but it begins when everybody is in, and really it begins when you go in." True.²

The feeling we have about the atmosphere of a theatre building as we enter it has always been an important element in the experience. In the past, spectators may not have been conscious of it, but they were affected by it nevertheless. Today, with the many varieties of theatre experience available to us, the first thing we should become aware of is the environment in which an event takes place: whether it is large or small, indoors or outdoors, formal or informal, familiar or unfamiliar.

At times scenic designers are able to alter the architecture of a theatre space to create a new arrangement or configuration. If the auditorium space is too large for a specific production, balconies might be blocked off, or the rear of the orchestra might be closed in some manner. Also, the decor can be altered: Bright colors, banners, and bright lighting could create a festive atmosphere in a space that is ordinarily formal and subdued. The first things for us, as audience members, to note are general characteristics: Is the space formal or informal? Is it large or small? Next is the question of the configuration of stage and audience seating.

THEATRE SPACES

A consideration of environment leads directly to an examination of the various forms and styles of theatre buildings, including the arrangements of audience seating. Throughout theatre history, there have been five basic stage arrangements, each with its own advantages and disadvantages, each suited to certain types of plays and certain types of productions, and each providing the audience with a somewhat different experience. The five are (1) the *proscenium*, or picture-frame, stage; (2) the *arena*, or circle, stage; (3) the *thrust* stage with three-quarters seating;³ (4) *created* and *found* stage spaces; and (5) all-purpose or "*black box*" theatre spaces, out of which a version of any one of the other four can be created.

Proscenium ("pro-SEEN-ee-um") Arch or frame surrounding the stage opening in a box or picture stage.

Arena Stage entirely surrounded by the audience; also known as *circle theatre* or *theatre-in-the-round*.

Thrust stage Stage space that thrusts into the audience space; a stage surrounded on three sides by audience seating.

Black box A theatre space that is open, flexible, and adaptable, usually without fixed seating. The stage-audience configuration can be rearranged to suit the individual requirements of a given production, making it both economical and particularly well suited to experimental work.

Proscenium or Picture-Frame Stage: History and Characteristics

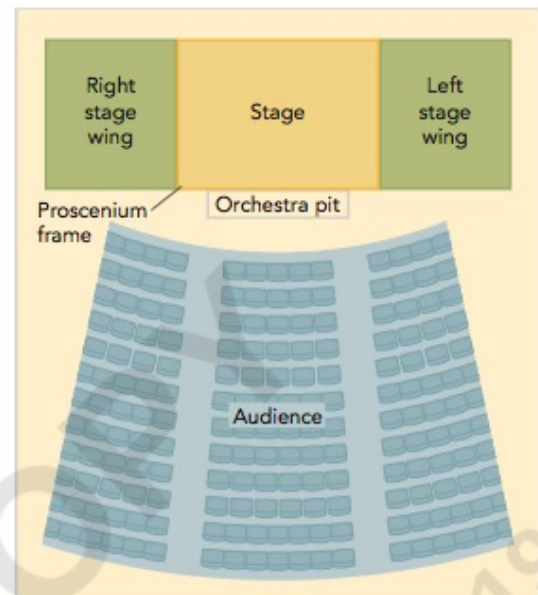
Perhaps the most familiar type of stage is the proscenium (pro-SEEN-ee-um), or picture-frame, stage. Broadway-style theatres, which for many years were models for theatres throughout the country, have proscenium stages.

The term *proscenium* comes from *proscenium arch*, the frame that separates the stage from the auditorium and that was first introduced in Italy during the Renaissance. Today this frame is not an arch but a rectangle. As the term *picture-frame stage* suggests, it resembles a large frame through which the audience looks at the stage. Another term for this type of stage is **fourth wall**, from the idea of the proscenium opening as a transparent glass wall through which the audience looks at the other three walls of a room.

Because the action takes place largely behind the proscenium opening, or frame, the seats in the auditorium all face in the same direction, toward the stage, just as seats in a movie theatre face the screen. The auditorium itself—the **house**, or **front of the house**, as it is called—is slanted downward from the back to the stage. (In theatre usage, the slant of an auditorium or stage floor is called a **rake**.) The stage is raised several feet above the auditorium floor, to aid visibility. There is usually a balcony (sometimes two balconies) protruding about halfway over the main floor. The main floor, incidentally, is called (in American usage) the **orchestra**. (In ancient Greek theatre, the orchestra was the circular acting area at the base of the hillside amphitheatre, but in modern usage it is the main floor of the theatre, where the audience sits.) In certain theatres, as well as concert halls and opera houses that have the proscenium arrangement, there are horseshoe-shaped tiers, or **boxes**, which ring the auditorium for several floors above the orchestra.

The popularity of the proscenium stage on Broadway and throughout the United States in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century was partly due to its wide acceptance throughout Europe. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, the proscenium theatre was adopted in every European country. For the next two centuries in Europe both the mechanics of stage machinery and the artistry of scene painting improved steadily allowing designers to create extraordinary stage pictures.

An Italian, Giacomo Torelli (1608–1678), developed methods of moving scenery on and off stage felicitously, and throughout the eighteenth century, members of one family, the Bibiena family, dominated the art of scene painting. The Bibiena sets usually consisted of vast halls, palaces, or gardens with towering columns and arches that framed spacious corridors or hallways, which disappeared into an endless series of vistas as far as the eye could see. At times during this period, audiences, as well as scene designers and technicians, became so carried away with spectacle that the visual aspects were emphasized to the exclusion of everything else, including the script and the acting.



PROSCENIUM THEATRE

The audience faces in one direction, toward an enclosed stage encased by a picture-frame opening. Scene changes and performers' entrances and exits are made behind the proscenium opening, out of sight of the audience.

Fourth wall Convention, in a proscenium-arch theatre, that the audience is looking into a room through an invisible fourth wall.

Front of the house Portion of a theatre reserved for the audience; sometimes called simply the **house**.

Rake (1) To position scenery on a slant or at an angle other than parallel or perpendicular to the curtain line. (2) An upward slope of the stage floor away from the audience.

Orchestra (1) In American usage, ground-floor seating in an auditorium. (2) Circular playing space in ancient Greek theatres.

Box Small private compartment for a group of spectators built into the walls of a traditional proscenium-arch theatre.

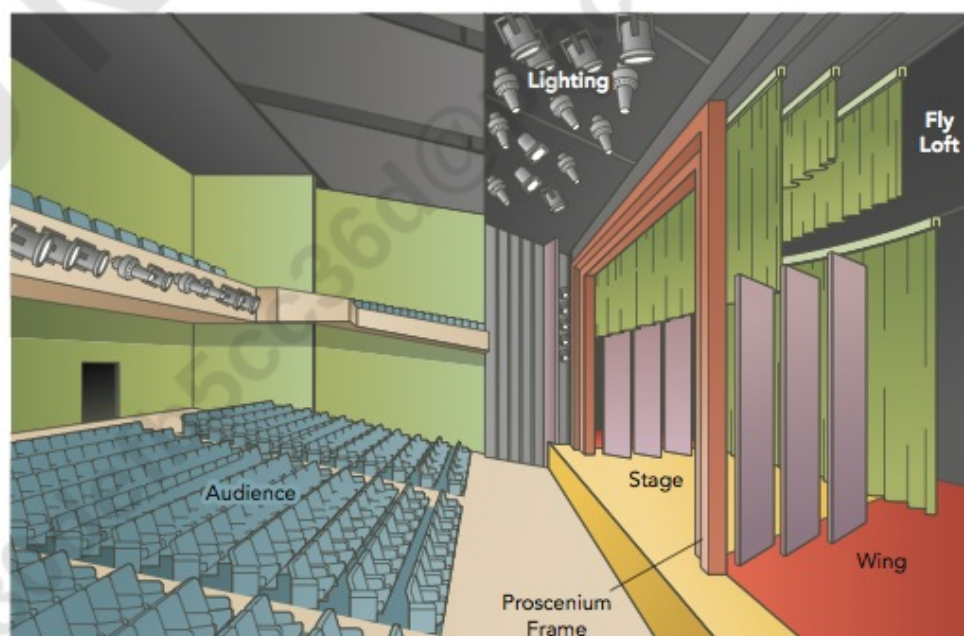


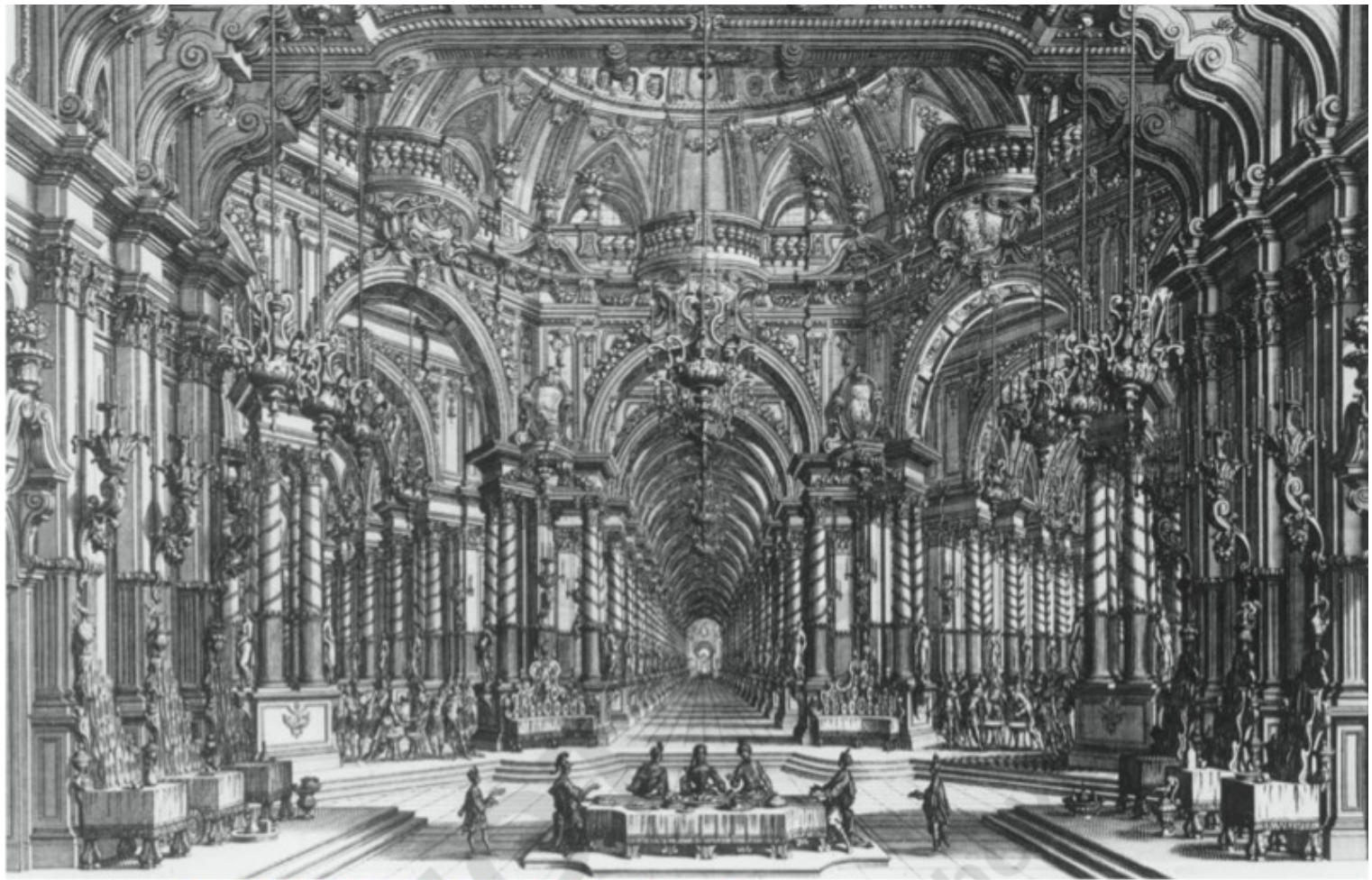
THE PROSCENIUM THEATRE

The traditional proscenium theatre resembles a movie theatre in terms of audience seating: All the seats face in one direction, toward the stage. The frame of the stage is like a picture frame, and behind the frame are all the elements of the visual production such as scenery, painted drops, pieces that move across the stage, platforms, steps, perhaps the interior of a room or several rooms. The theatre shown here, the Bolton Theatre at the Cleveland Play House, is an excellent example of a proscenium theatre. It was redesigned by the architect Philip Johnson and renovated in 1983. (Photo by Paul Tepley, Courtesy of Cleveland Play House)

A MODERN PROSCENIUM-STAGE THEATRE

In this cutaway drawing we see the audience seating at the left, all facing in the one direction, toward the stage. Behind the orchestra pit in the center is the apron on the stage; and then the proscenium frame, behind which are the flats and other scenic elements. Overhead, scenery can be raised into the fly loft above the stage area.





A BIBIENA SET FOR A FORMAL PROSCENIUM THEATRE

The standard theatre throughout Europe and the United States from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century was a formal proscenium space. The audience sat in a downstairs orchestra, in balconies, and in side boxes facing an ornate picture-frame stage. Impressive scenery and other visual effects were created and changed behind the curtain that covers the proscenium opening. In the eighteenth century, the Bibiena family from Italy created scene designs on a grand scale for such theatres throughout Europe. They painted backdrops with vistas that seemed to disappear into the far distance. This scene is by Giuseppe di Bibiena (1696–1757). (© akg-images/Newscom)

Although there have been many changes in theatre production, and today we have a wide variety of production approaches, we are still attracted to ingenious displays of visual effects in proscenium theatres. This is especially true of large musicals such as *The Phantom of the Opera*, *The Lion King*, *Wicked*, and *Cinderella*. Because the machinery and the workings of scene changes can be concealed behind a proscenium opening, this type of stage offers a perfect arrangement for spectacle.

There are other advantages to the proscenium stage. Realistic scenery—a living room, an office, a kitchen—looks good behind a proscenium frame; the scene designer can create the illusion of a genuine, complete room more easily with a proscenium stage than with any other. Also, the strong central focus provided by the frame rivets the attention of the audience. There are times, too, when we want the detachment, the distancing, that a proscenium provides.

There are disadvantages as well, however. As we have seen, the proscenium stage creates a temptation to get carried away with visual pyrotechnics. In addition,



THE PROSCENIUM THEATRE: IDEAL FOR SPECTACLE

For large-scale musicals the proscenium theatre is ideal. The scenery and other elements can be hidden above, behind, and around the stage, and then moved into the main stage area, as if by magic. In addition, the scale of the scenic effects can be extensive and sometimes electrifying. The scene shown here is from Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Cinderella*, directed by Mark Brokaw; choreography by Josh Rhodes; sets by Anna Louizos; costumes by William Ivey Long; lighting by Kenneth Posner. (© Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux)

a proscenium stage tends to be remote and formal. Some of us, as spectators, prefer the intimacy and informality—the experience of being close to the action—found in the arena and thrust theatres.

Arena Stage: History and Characteristics

To some of us, proscenium theatres, decorated in gold and red plush, look more like temples of art than theatres. We prefer a more informal, intimate theatre environment. A movement in this direction began in the United States just after World War II, when a number of theatre practitioners decided to break away from the formality of proscenium theatres. This was part of an overall desire to bring many aspects of theatre closer to everyday life: acting styles, the subject matter of plays, the manner of presentation, and the shape of the theatre space. One form this reaction took was the *arena stage*—a return to one of the most ancient stage arrangements.

From as far back as we have records, we know that tribal ceremonies and rituals, in all parts of the world, have been held in some form of circle space. For example, many scholars believe that the ancient Greek theatre evolved from an arena form. In an arena theatre (also called *circle theatre* or *theatre-in-the-round*) there is a playing space in the center of a square or circle, with seats for spectators all around it. The arrangement is similar to that in sports arenas featuring boxing or basketball. The stage may be a raised area a few feet off the main floor, with seats rising from the floor level; or it may be on the floor itself, with seats raised on levels around it. When seating is close to the stage, there is usually some kind of demarcation indicating the boundaries of the playing area.

One advantage of the arena theatre is that it offers more intimacy than the ordinary proscenium. With the performers in the center, even in a larger theatre, we can be closer to them. If the same number of people attends an arena event and a proscenium event, at least half of those at the arena will be nearer the action: Someone who would have been in the twelfth row in a proscenium theatre will be in the sixth row in an arena theatre. Besides, with this proximity to the stage, the arena theatre has another advantage: There is no frame or barrier to separate the performers from us.

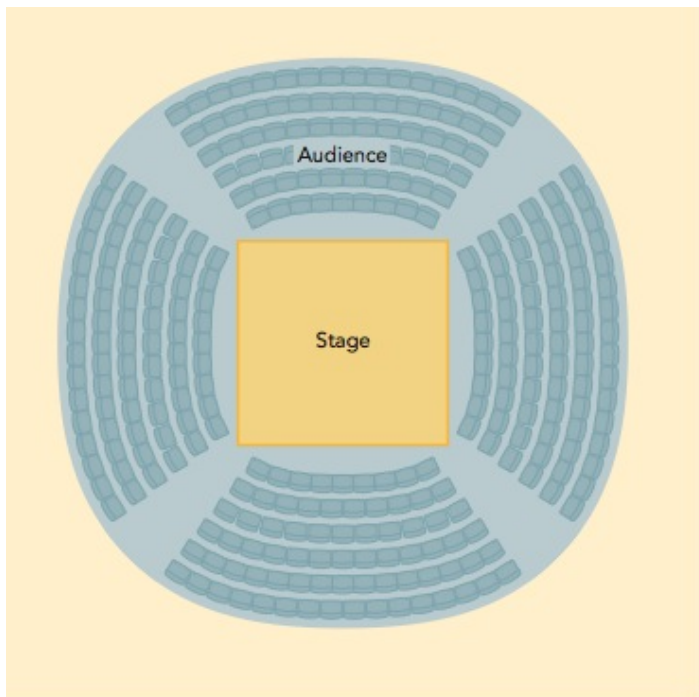
Beyond these considerations, in the arena arrangement there is an unconscious communion, basic to human behavior, which comes when people form a circle—from the embrace of two of us to a circle for children's games to a larger gathering where we form an enclosure around a fire or an altar. It is no coincidence that virtually all of the earliest forms of theatre were "in the round."

A practical advantage of the arena theatre is economy. All you need for this kind of theatre is a large room: You designate a playing space, arrange rows of seats around the sides, and hang lights on pipes above, and you have a theatre. Elaborate scenery is impossible because it would block the view of large parts of the audience. A few pieces of furniture, with perhaps a lamp or sign hung from the ceiling, are all you need to indicate where a scene takes place. Many low-budget groups have found that they can build a workable and even attractive theatre-in-the-round when a proscenium theatre would be out of the question. These two factors—intimacy and economy—no doubt explain why arena theatre is one of the oldest stage forms, as well as one still very much in use today.

In spite of its long history, however, and its resurgence in recent years, the arena stage has often been eclipsed by other forms. One reason is that its design, while allowing for intimacy, also dictates a certain austerity. As we noted before, it is impossible to have elaborate scenery because that would block the view of many spectators. Also, the performers must make all their entrances and exits along aisles that run through the audience, and they can sometimes be seen before and after they are supposed to appear onstage. The arena's lack of adaptability in this respect may explain why some of the circle theatres that opened twenty or thirty years ago have since closed. A number survive, however, and continue to do well. One of the best-known is the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. In addition, throughout this country there are a number of *tent theatres* in arena form where musical revivals and concerts are given.

Thrust Stage: History and Characteristics

Falling between the proscenium and the arena is a third type of theatre: the *thrust stage* with three-quarters seating. In one form or another, this U-shape arrangement



PLAN OF AN ARENA STAGE

The audience sits on four sides or in a circle surrounding the stage. Entrances and exits are made through the aisles or through tunnels underneath the aisles. A feeling of intimacy is achieved because the audience is close to the action and encloses it.

Stage house Stage floor and the space around it to the side walls, as well as the space above it up to the grid.

spectators. While they were originally wooden structures in the classical Greek era, their design was duplicated in stone structures all over Greece in the following two centuries. Remnants of these stone theatres remain today throughout

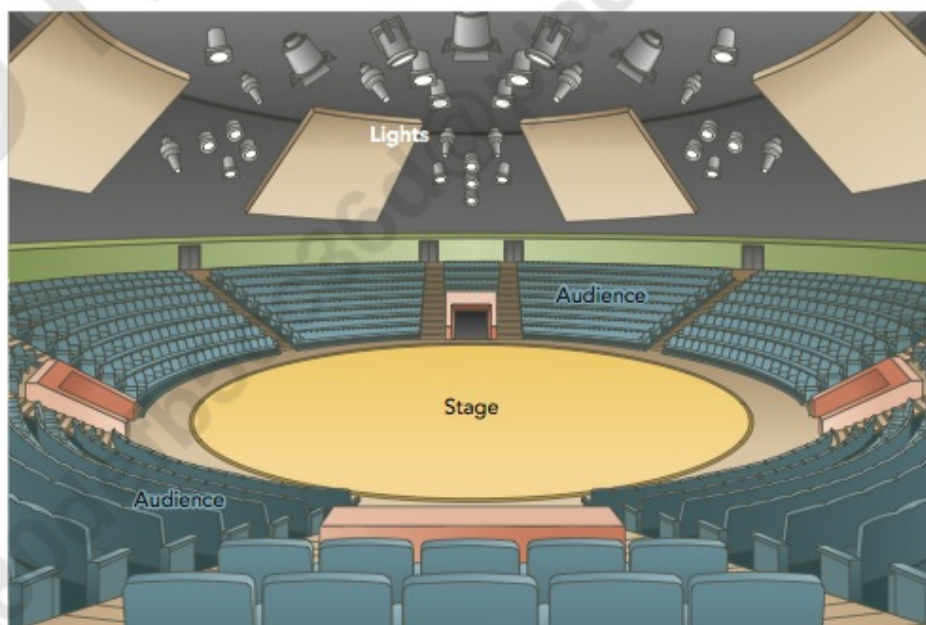
has been the most widely used of all stage spaces. In the basic arrangement for this type of theatre, we sit on three sides, or in a semicircle, enclosing a stage, which protrudes into the center. At the back of the playing area is some form of **stage house** providing for the entrances and exits of the performers as well as for scene changes. The thrust stage combines some of the best features of the other two stage types: the sense of intimacy and the “wraparound” feeling of the arena, and the focused stage placed against a single background found in the proscenium.

The thrust stage was developed by the classical Greeks for their tragedies and comedies. They adapted the circle used for tribal rituals and other ceremonies—the circle called the *orchestra*—by locating it at the base of a curving hillside. The slope of the hill formed a natural amphitheatre for the spectators. At the rear of the orchestra circle, opposite the hillside, was placed a stage house, which had formal doors through which characters made their entrances and exits and served as a background for the action. The stage house also provided a place for the actors to change their costumes.

The largest Greek theatres seated 15,000 or more

THE STAGE AND SEATING IN AN ARENA THEATRE

The arena theatre attempts to capture the immediacy of primitive theatre. It uses the barest essentials of stage scenery but the full resources of contemporary stage lighting.





ROBERT WILSON: AUTEUR DIRECTOR

Robert Wilson is one of the foremost auteur directors in today's theatre. Such directors create their own theatre pieces, providing the vision and the interpretation. They serve not only as directors but also as authors, taking elements from many sources and melding them into their own version of what we see onstage. Shown here is a scene from Wilson's *Black Rider: The Casting of the Magic Bullets*. (© Craig Schwartz/Center Theatre Group, Ahmanson Theatre)

significant plays from the past that may have been overlooked, preparing material for teachers whose students will be attending performances, and writing articles for the programs that are distributed at performances. Of particular importance to directors is the work of dramaturges in conducting research on previous productions of classic plays, as well as researching past criticism and interpretations of these plays. It is easy to see how the work of the dramaturg can be invaluable in assisting the director to arrive at decisions regarding style, approach, and concept.

THE AUTEUR DIRECTOR AND THE POSTMODERN DIRECTOR

In addition to the traditional director, there are two other types of stage directors: the auteur director and the postmodern director. There are a number of similarities between these two, but we will look at them one at a time, beginning with the auteur director.

The Auteur Director

Auteur is a French word meaning "author." Just after World War II, French critics began using this term to describe certain film directors, who, they said, were really the authors of the films they made. In these films the point of view and the implementation of that point of view came almost entirely from the director, not from a writer. The term has since been applied to a type of stage director as well. We are not speaking here of directors who alter the time or place in which the action occurs but retain the original script—the playwright's words and the sequence of scenes. We are speaking rather of directors who make more drastic alterations or transformations in the material, taking responsibility for shaping *every* element in the production, including the script.

Auteur French term for author. When used to describe a director it suggests one who makes drastic alterations and transformations to a traditional script.



IN FOCUS: MODERN VERSUS POSTMODERN PRODUCTION AESTHETICS

Modern	Postmodern
Organic unity	Interdisciplinary
Single view	No single view can predominate
Single viewer approach	Multiperspective, multifocus
Shared values of audience	Multicultural
Metaphorical or representational	Presentational
Linear	Nonlinear, simultaneous
Closeness	Distance
Time is singularly staged	Multiple time frames are presented simultaneously
Space is unified	Space is fragmented and can be simultaneously conceived
(Prepared by Tom Mikotowicz)	

Interestingly, one of the first and most important auteur directors began his work with a traditional director, Stanislavski, and then went out on his own—the Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940), who developed a type of theatre in which he controlled all the elements. The script was only one of many aspects that Meyerhold used for his own purposes. He would rewrite or eliminate text in order to present his own vision of the material. Performers, too, were subject to his overall ideas. Often they were called on to perform like circus acrobats or robots. The finished product was frequently exciting and almost always innovative, but it reflected Meyerhold’s point of view, strongly imposed on all the elements, not the viewpoint of a writer or anyone else.

Following in Meyerhold’s footsteps, many avant-garde directors of the mid-twentieth century, such as Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999), Richard Foreman, and Robert Wilson, can also be classified as auteur directors. Each in his own way demanded that the text serve his purposes, not the other way around. In some cases, such as many of Wilson’s pieces, the text is only fragmentary and is one of the least important elements. In the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, before the political changes of the early 1990s, certain directors, who had not been allowed to deal with material that questioned the government hierarchy, drastically reworked established texts in order to make a political comment. These directors, too, imposed their own vision, rather than that of the playwright, on the material.

Another recent auteur director is Ivo van Hove (b. 1958), a Flemish director who enjoys reinventing the classics. In his *Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois performs a good part of the play naked in a bathtub; and his version of *The Misanthrope* by Molière, which he transfers to the present day, features cell phones, laptops, BlackBerrys, and digital cameras. Two highly regarded contemporary American auteur directors are Julie Taymor (b. 1952) and Mary Zimmerman (b. 1960).



THE CLASSIC SPANISH STAGE

A variation on the thrust stage used in Elizabethan England is the Spanish *corral*. A version of this stage, uncovered by accident in 1953, is shown here in Almagro, Spain, where a theatre festival is held each year. Not strictly speaking a thrust stage, it has all the other components of a Renaissance outdoor theatre, with the platform stage and audience seating in boxes or a balcony around three sides.

(Courtesy of the Festival Internacional de Teatro Clásico de Almagro. Photographer: Guillermo Casas)

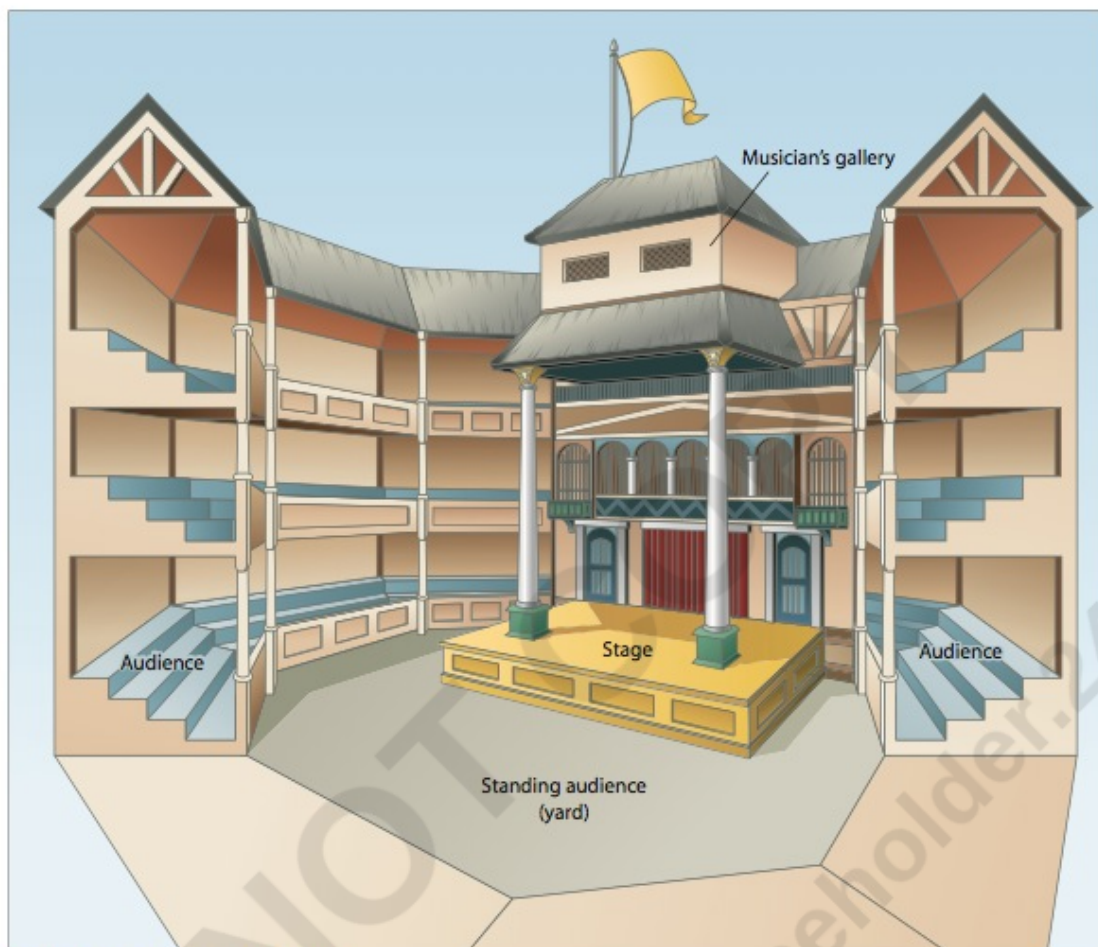
behind the platform, served as the stage house. An interesting coincidence is that an almost identical theatre took shape in Spain at the same time. The inns in Spain were called *corrales*, and this name was given to the theatres that developed there.

The formal English theatres of Shakespeare's day, such as the Globe and the Fortune, were similar to the inn theatres: The audience stood in an open area around a platform stage, and three levels of spectators sat in closed galleries at the back and sides. A roof covered part of the stage; at the back of the stage, some form of raised area served for balcony scenes (as in *Romeo and Juliet*). At the rear of the stage, also, scenes could be concealed and then "discovered." On each side at the rear was a door used for entrances and exits.

These theatres were fascinating combinations of diverse elements: They were both indoors and outdoors; some spectators stood while others sat; and the audience was composed of almost all levels of society. The physical environment must have been stimulating: Performers standing at the front of the thrust stage were in the center of a hemisphere of spectators, on three sides around them as well as above and below. These theatres held 2,000 to 3,000 spectators, but no one in the audience was more than 60 feet or so from the stage, and most people were much closer. Being in the midst of so many people, enclosed on all sides but with the open sky above, must have instilled a feeling of great communion among audiences and performers. Something of the same feeling can be recaptured when one visits the recently reconstructed Globe Theatre in London.

Shortly after Shakespeare's day, in the latter part of the seventeenth century, there were two significant theatrical developments in England, in Spain, and throughout Europe: (1) the theatre moved almost completely indoors; and (2) the stage began a slow but steady retreat behind the proscenium opening, partly because performances were indoors, but more because the style of theatres changed. For more than two centuries the thrust stage was in eclipse, not to reappear until about 1900, when a few theatres in England began using a version of the thrust stage to

Corral Theatre building of the Spanish golden age, usually located in the courtyard of a series of adjoining buildings.



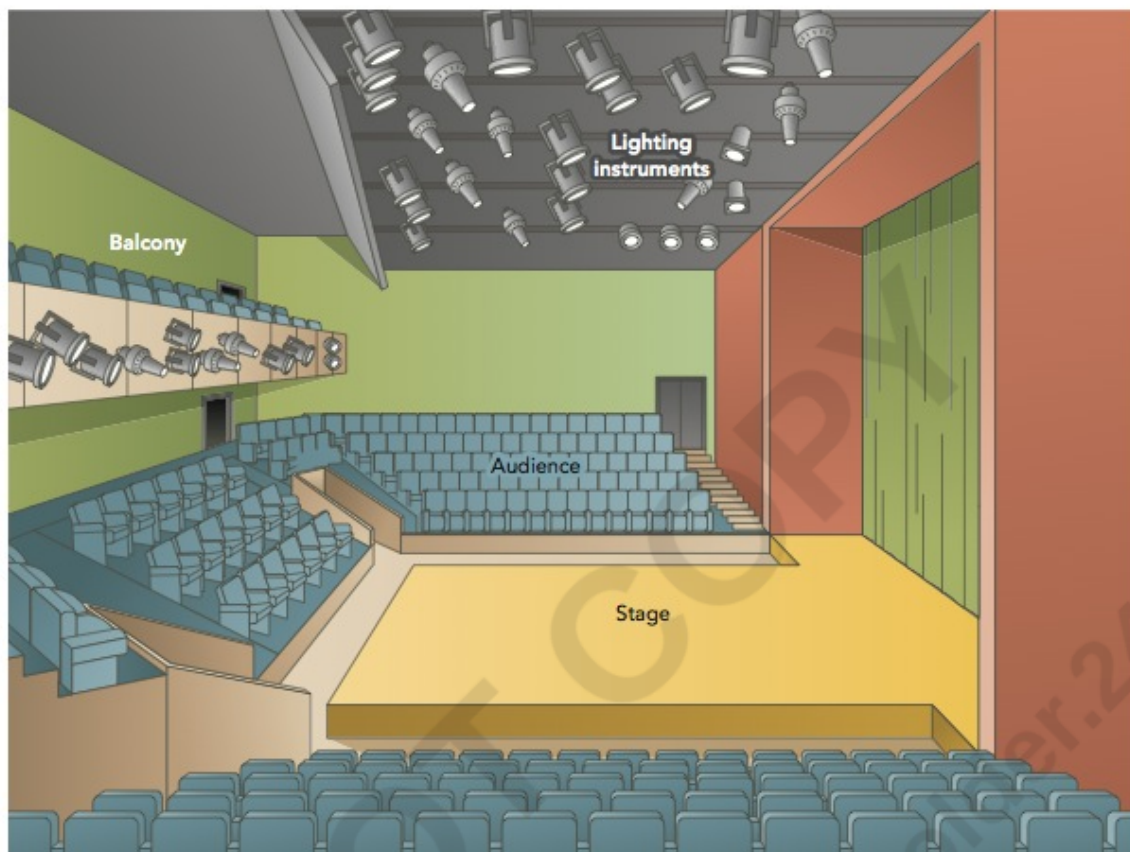
AN ELIZABETHAN PLAYHOUSE

This drawing shows the kind of stage on which the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries were first presented. A platform stage juts into an open courtyard, with spectators standing on three sides. Three levels of enclosed seats rise above the courtyard. There are doors at the rear of the stage for entrances and exits and an upper level for balcony scenes.

produce Shakespeare. The return of the thrust stage resulted from a growing realization that Elizabethan plays could be done best on a stage similar to the one for which they had been written.

In the United States and Canada, though, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the thrust stage came to the fore again. Since then a number of fine theatres of this type have been built, including the Guthrie in Minneapolis; the Shakespeare Theater in Stratford, Ontario; the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles; and the Long Wharf in New Haven.

We should also note that the basic stage of traditional Chinese and Japanese drama (including no theatre in Japan) is a form of thrust stage: a raised, open platform stage frequently covered by a roof, with the audience sitting on two or three sides around the platform. Entrances and exits are made from doors or ramps at the rear of the stage.



THE STAGE AND SEATING AREA OF A THRUST-STAGE THEATRE

This cutaway drawing of a thrust stage shows how the playing area juts into the audience, which surrounds the stage on three sides. This configuration affords intimacy, but at the back (shown here at the right) is an area that furnishes a natural backdrop for the action.

The obvious advantages of the thrust stage—the intimacy of three-quarters seating and the close audience-performer relationship, together with the fact that so many of the world's great dramatic works were written for it—give it a significant place alongside the other major forms.

Created and Found Spaces

After World War II a number of avant-garde theatre artists, such as the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999), undertook to reform theatre at every level. Since the various elements of theatre are inextricably bound together, their search for a more basic kind of theatre included a close look at the physical arrangement of the playing area and its relationship to the audience.

The Performance Group, which led spectators one at a time into the production of *Dionysus in 69* (as described earlier in this chapter), is typical in this regard. It presented its productions in a large garage converted into an open theatre space. At various places in the garage, scaffolding and ledges were built for audience seating. The Performance Group, like other modern avant-garde companies, owed a great debt to a Frenchman, Antonin Artaud

PLAYING YOUR PART: EXPERIENCING THEATRE



1. Rearrange your classroom seating into proscenium, arena, and thrust configurations. Read a speech aloud from a play or a paragraph from a novel to the class in each of these configurations. How is your presentation affected by the arrangement of the space?
2. Visit a gym or sports arena on your campus. What is the configuration of the space? How does it relate to a theatre environment? What type of popular entertainment might be staged there?
3. Find an outdoor space on your campus that might be used for theatre. What type of presentation would you stage there? Why?



A MODERN THRUST STAGE

The thrust stage, with a stage area extending into audience seating that surrounds it on three sides, is one of the oldest arrangements, having been used by the Greeks and by the Elizabethans in the time of Shakespeare. It has been revived successfully in the modern period and is widely used in Europe and the United States. A good example is the recently renovated Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. (© Craig Schwartz/Center Theatre Group, Ahmanson Theatre)

(1896–1948), one of the first theatre people to examine in depth the questions raised by the avant-garde. An actor and director who wrote a series of articles and essays about theatre, Artaud was brilliant but inconsistent (he spent several periods of his life in mental institutions). Many of Artaud's ideas, however, were to prove prophetic: Notions he put forward in the 1920s and 1930s, considered impossible or impractical at the time, have since become common



SITE-SPECIFIC THEATRE CREATED AND FOUND SPACE

Shown here are two examples of site-specific theatre. In the first, a production loosely based on *Macbeth*, entitled *Sleep No More* by the British group Punchdrunk, was presented in three abandoned warehouses in New York City through which the audience was led to see various segments, some of which involved movement, some of which were like tableaux. In the scene here, the Macbeth character (Nicholas Bruder) is seen in a bathtub, with the Lady Macbeth character (Sophie Bortolussi) outside the tub. (© Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux) The second example shows the Polish theatre company Biuro Podrozy in a production of *Macbeth*, using its trademark stilts on a street, at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland. (© Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images News/Getty Images)



practice among experimental theatre groups. Among his proposals was one on the physical theatre:

We abolish the stage and auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theater of the action. A direct communication will be reestablished between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it. This envelopment results, in part, from the very configuration of the room itself. Thus, abandoning the architecture of present-day theaters, we shall take some hangar or barn which we shall have reconstructed according to processes which have culminated in the architecture of certain churches or holy places, and of certain temples in Tibet.⁴

Some of Artaud's ideas were put into practice when the movement to explore new concepts became widespread. In the generation after Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski included the physical arrangements of stage space in his experiments. Not only Grotowski but others in the avant-garde movement developed theatre space in a variety of ways.

Nontheatre Buildings Artaud mentioned a barn or hangar for performances. In recent years virtually all kinds of structures have been used: lofts, warehouses, fire stations, basements, churches, breweries, and gymnasiums. This practice should not be confused with the conversion of unusual spaces to full-scale theatres, which has numerous precedents in the past; historically, indoor tennis courts, palace ballrooms, and monastery dining halls have been converted into theatres. We are, instead, describing here the use of nontheatre structures as they are, with their original architectural elements intact, and carving out special areas for acting and viewing—as with the garage used by the Performance Group. In our contemporary theatre, *site-specific companies* are theatre groups that create productions for specific nontheatre locations. For example, the English company Punchdrunk staged *Sleep No More*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in three abandoned warehouses in Manhattan with the audiences moving through various spaces created in them.

Site-specific companies
Theatre groups that create productions for specific nontheatre locations.

Adapted Spaces One frequent practice was using or creating a space to fit a play, rather than (as is normally the case) making the play fit the space. Grotowski, in particular, pursued the notion of finding a different, appropriate configuration for each production. In Grotowski's production of the Doctor Faustus story, for example, the theatre was filled with two long tables at which spectators sat as if they were guests at a banquet hosted by Faustus. The action took place at the heads of the tables and even on the tabletops. For his production of *The Constant Prince*, a fence was built around the playing area, and the audience sat behind the fence, looking over it like spectators at a bullfight. In recent decades there have been similar attempts to deal with theatre spaces in many parts of Europe and the United States.

Street Theatre One development—which was actually a return to practices in medieval Europe—is theatre held outdoors in nontraditional settings. A good example is *street theatre*. Generally, street theatre is of three types: (1) plays from



AN ISLAND FOR SITE-SPECIFIC THEATRE

In the Netherlands there is a festival, known as the Oerol Festival, in which for ten days in June an entire island, Terschelling, is used by a variety of theatre companies to present their pieces. Groups set up in all kinds of places on the island—taverns, barns, tents, and garages, and on beaches—to offer their productions. Shown here on a beach is a production entitled *Salted*, written and directed by Judith de Rijke and produced by Tryater of Holland, which brought together young artists from various regions to celebrate the linguistic diversity of Europe. (© Sake Elzinga)

the standard repertoire presented in the streets; (2) *neighborhood theatre*, in which an original play deals with problems and aspirations of a specific population of a city, such as Puerto Ricans, African Americans, or Italians; and (3) *guerrilla theatre*, aggressive, politically oriented theatre produced by an activist group in the streets in an attempt to persuade us to become more politically involved, such as street presentations during the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2012. Whatever the form, the important point for our purposes is that these productions take place not in theatre buildings but in places like parks, hospitals, jails, and bus stations.

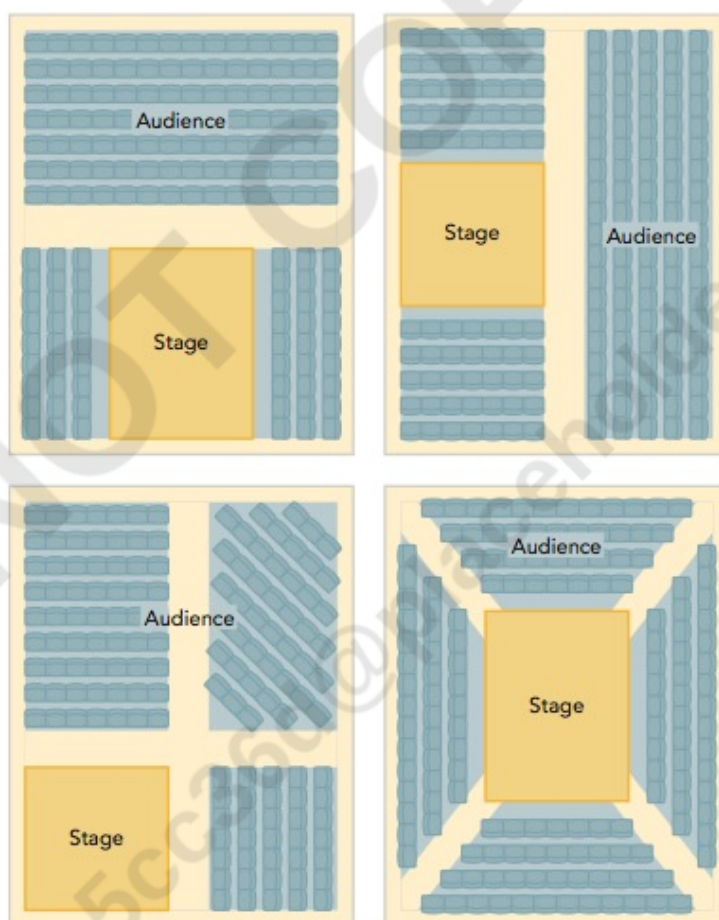
In these productions, theatre is brought to those of us who might not otherwise see it. Also, audiences in such unusual settings are challenged to rethink what theatre is all about. On the other hand, there are inherent disadvantages to impromptu productions in the streets or other “found spaces”: The audience must be caught on the run, and there is rarely time for more than a sketch or vignette. Nor are there facilities for presenting a fully developed work—but often that is not the purpose of these undertakings in the first place.

Multifocus Environments An approach that sometimes accompanies these unusual arrangements is *multifocus theatre*. In simple terms, this means not only that there is more than one playing area, such as the four corners of the room (as Artaud suggested in one article), but also that something is going on in several of them simultaneously. This is somewhat like a three-ring circus, where we see an

Multifocus theatre An environment in which there is more than one playing area.

activity in each ring and must either concentrate on one or divide our attention among two or three.

There are several theories behind the idea of multifocus theatre. One is that a multifocus event is more like everyday life; if you stand on a street corner, there is activity all around you—in the four directions of the streets, in the buildings above—not just in one spot. You select which area you will observe, or perhaps you watch several areas at one time. The argument is that in theatre, you should have the same choice. In multifocus productions no single space or activity is supposed to be more important than any other. We either take in several impressions at once and synthesize them in our own mind or select one item as most arresting and concentrate on that. There is no such thing as the “best



THE MULTIPURPOSE OR “BLACK BOX” THEATRE

A popular type of modern theatre is the multipurpose space, sometimes called a “black box.” It consists of an open space with perhaps a pipe grid on the ceiling from which lighting and sound instruments can be suspended. A stage platform can be positioned at any place in the space, and movable chairs for spectators can be placed around the playing area. The diagrams suggest some of the possibilities of stage arrangements in a multipurpose theatre.



IN FOCUS: POPULAR PERFORMANCE SPACES

Many spaces used for live popular entertainments are reminiscent of theatre environments. Arenas used for sports, circuses, and rock concerts are configured much like theatrical spaces discussed in this chapter. Madison Square Garden in New York, Soldier Field in Chicago, the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, and university sports arenas are all large spaces that primarily house sporting events but are also used for rock concerts and other popular spectacles. Madison Square Garden, for example, has housed circuses, elaborate rock concerts, and music award ceremonies. This means that an arena like the Garden is often equipped with the most innovative technology for lighting, stage, and sound effects.

Spectacular performance spaces for magicians, circuses, concerts, and stage extravaganzas are found in all of the major hotels in Las Vegas. There is live entertainment also presented in fairgrounds and amusement parks across our country.

These spaces for popular performances are most often configured in the round, with spectators surrounding the events. Some are configured three-quarters round. The reason is to maximize the number of audience

members as well as to create an electrifying interactive entertainment. With these configurations, we, as spectators, are also able to watch and possibly influence each other's reactions.

Such popular performance spaces are usually extremely large, much larger than environments created exclusively for theatre. For example, the Rose Bowl accommodates over 90,000 fans for football games. Even a comparatively small collegiate athletic facility, Western Hall on the Western Illinois University campus, can accommodate approximately 5,000 spectators.

The relationship between spaces for popular entertainments and theatrical environments is complex. Throughout theatre history, the same spaces were used for popular arts and for theatrical performances. Modern theatre artists have experimented with staging dramatic performances within spaces created for concerts and circuses.

For that matter, the performance qualities of sports, the circus, and rock concerts underscore their shared heritage with the theatrical arts. It is not surprising, then, that their spaces are also similar and often multipurpose.

seat in the house"; all seats are equally good, because the activity in all parts of the theatre is equally important. Sometimes multifocus theatre is joined with *multimedia theatre*—presentations that offer some combination of acting, films, video, dance, music, slides, and light show.

All-Purpose Theatre Spaces: The Black Box

Because of the interest in a variety of spaces in modern theatre production, and the requirements of many different kinds of productions, a number of theatre complexes, including many college theatre departments, have built spaces that can be adapted to an almost infinite variety of configurations. Seats, lights, platforms, levels—every aspect of such a theatre is flexible and movable.

In this kind of space the designers can create a proscenium, a thrust, an arena, or some combination of these, but the designers can also create corner stages, island stages, and multifocus arrangements with playing areas in several parts of the studio. This space is sometimes referred to as a *black box* because it is often an empty rectangular space into which various audience seating and stage arrangements can be introduced.

PLAYING YOUR PART: THINKING ABOUT THEATRE



1. As discussed in this chapter, there are four major types of stage spaces: proscenium, arena, thrust, and found space. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of each? On which type of stage space would you prefer to watch a performance?
2. Using information from this chapter, explain which type of stage space you would feel is best suited for the following productions: a large-scale musical, an intimate personal drama, a Shakespearean drama, and a play of political protest.
3. The size of theatre spaces can range from fewer than 100 spectators to more than 3,000. What do you consider an ideal-sized theatre for the following types of productions: a musical, a Shakespearean play, a modern family drama? Suggest the ideal number of audience seats for each and the shape and size of the ideal stage space for each.

SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS OF THEATRE ENVIRONMENTS

Simply assigning a theatre to a category does not adequately describe the environment; we must also take into account a number of other variables. Two theatres may be of the same type and still be quite different in size, atmosphere, and setting. The experience in a small off-off-Broadway-type thrust theatre will be far different from that in a thrust theatre several times larger, such as the Guthrie in Minneapolis. Also, one theatre may be indoors and another of the same type outdoors.

There are other factors that architects, producers, and designers must take into account, one of which is the human scale. No matter what the configuration, the performer is the basic scale by which everything is measured in theatre. Theatre architects as well as scenic and lighting designers must always keep this in mind, and we should be aware of it as well. When the theatre environment and the stage space violate this human scale in some way, problems are created for performers and us.

There is also the question of appropriateness. By *appropriateness* we mean the relationship of a stage space to a play or production. A large-scale musical requires a full stage—usually a proscenium stage—and a large auditorium from which we can get the full effect of the spectacle. However, an intimate, small cast family drama with its intense personal confrontations might require a small playing area so that we are close enough to the action to make a connection with the characters onstage.

Rather than being limited to one type of building and one type of stage, we are fortunate today in having a full range of environments in which to experience theatre. Taken all in all, whether single-focus or multifocus, indoors or outdoors, the recent innovations in theatre milieus have added new alternatives, rich in possibilities, to the traditional settings for theatrical productions. They have also called attention to the importance of environment in our total theatre experience.

SUMMARY

1. The atmosphere and environment of the theatre space play a large part in setting the tone of an event.
2. Experimental theatre groups in recent years have deliberately made spectators aware of the environment.
3. Throughout theatre history there have been five basic stage and auditorium arrangements: proscenium, arena, thrust, created or found space, and all-purpose or "black box" spaces.
4. The proscenium theatre features a picture-frame stage, in which the audience faces directly toward the stage and looks through the proscenium opening at the "picture." The proscenium stage aids illusion: Placing a room of a house behind the proscenium, for example, allows the scene designer to create an extremely realistic set. This type of stage also allows elaborate scene shifts and visual displays because it generally has a large backstage area and a fly loft. It also creates a distancing effect, which works to the advantage of certain types of drama. At the same time, however, the proscenium frame sets up a barrier between the performers and the audience.
5. The arena or circle stage places the playing area in the center with the audience seated in a circle or square around it. This offers an economical way to produce theatre and an opportunity for great intimacy between performers and spectators, but it cannot offer full visual displays in terms of scenery and scene changes.
6. The thrust stage with three-quarters seating is a platform stage with seating on three sides. Entrances and exits are made at the rear, and there is an opportunity for a certain amount of scenery. This form combines some of the scenic features of the proscenium theatre with the intimacy of the arena stage.
7. Created or found space takes several forms: use of nontheatre buildings, adaptation of a given space to fit individual productions, use of outdoor settings, street theatre, multifocus environments, and all-purpose spaces.
8. The theatre space referred to as a *black box* is an open, adaptable space that can be configured into a variety of stage-audience arrangements, providing for maximum flexibility and economy.
9. Size and location (indoors or outdoors, etc.), along with the shape and character of a theatre building, affect the environment.