

# THE WORLD OF THEATRE: TRADITION AND INNOVATION

---

© 2006

Mira Felner, Hunter College of The City University of New York  
Claudia Orenstein, Hunter College of The City University of New York

---

**0-205-36063-7** Exam Copy ISBN  
(Please use above number to order your exam copy.)

---

Visit [www.ablongman.com/relocator](http://www.ablongman.com/relocator) to contact your local Allyn & Bacon/Longman representative.

s a m p l e   c h a p t e r

The pages of this Sample Chapter may have  
slight variations in final published form.

Allyn & Bacon  
75 Arlington St., Suite 300  
Boston, MA 02116  
[www.ablongman.com](http://www.ablongman.com)



# *The Audience* *Partners in Performance*

# 2



More intimate than many modern theatres, Heisei Nakamura-za's reconstructed Edo period *kabuki* theatre brings audience members seated near the rampway close enough to reach out and touch the actor making his way to the stage. From his vantage point, the actor can take in the entire audience. *The Summer Festival* performed at Lincoln Center, New York.

© Stephanie Berger



*The Audience and the Actor: The Invisible Bond*

*The Audience Is a Community*

*Audience Members Construct Meaning as Individuals*

Personal Identity and the Construction of Meaning

*Audience Members Choose Focus*

*Conventions of Audience Response*

*Audience Conventions in Western Theatre History*

The Once-Active Audience

The Rise of the Passive Audience

Rebelling against Realism's Passive Audience

*Political Theatre: Moving the Audience to Action*

Agit-Prop: Activating the Audience

Bertolt Brecht: Challenging the Audience

Augusto Boal: Involving the Audience

The Living Theatre: Confronting the Audience

Engaging the Audience Today

*From Provocation to Mainstream: The Evolution of a Convention*

*Meeting Theatre's Challenges*



To go to the theatre is to experience the special excitement of live performance and to enter into a new set of relationships with actors, a performance, and the spectators that surround you. As you wait for the event to begin, in all likelihood it has not entered your head that the actors have also been waiting for you. All of their work has been in anticipation of your response. The performers *need* you to be there, and if you and everyone in the audience suddenly vanished leaving an empty theatre, there would be no performance. Your presence is vital to the theatre experience itself, for the most essential component of the theatre is the live actor–audience interaction with all its stimulation and surprise.

# History

IN PERSPECTIVE

## THE ORIGINS OF THEATRE

**T**he need to tell a story, to imitate, to play, and to perform repeated acts that ensure the continuation of a community are so vital to the human psyche that cultures everywhere have developed some form of enactment. Since these activities predate recorded history and leave no tangible trace, the precise origins of theatre are cloaked in mystery. Theatre most likely evolved over time as a form of cultural expression and has no specific moment of creation.

The use of music, dance, costumes, props, and masks are common to ritual and theatrical performances, so theorists have speculated that many forms of theatre evolved from rituals. The earliest rituals were performed to please or appease the gods who were the intended audience, and some extant traditions today remind us that ritual and theatre can coexist in the same form. Consider performance traditions such as the *kutiyattam* from the Kerala region in India that uses special sacred places for performance. Actors face away from the audience toward the shrine and the temple deity. Attendance at a performance is also an act of worship. In Japan

at the Ise Shrine, the most sacred spot in Japan, priestesses of the indigenous Shinto religion perform special dance ceremonies. Here too, audiences may come to watch, but the performers face away from them because the dances are meant primarily for the pleasure of the divine spectators, the Shinto gods. As the human audience takes on increased importance, we see the movement from sacred ritual to secular theatre.

We have evidence that ancient Greek tragedy evolved from **dithyrambs**, hymns sung and danced in praise of the god Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, and early Greek theatres contained an altar. From the ancient Egyptian Abydos ritual performance that hieroglyphs date to 2500 B.C.E. to the Christian passion plays of medieval Europe, many of the rituals associated with performance tell tales of resurrection and renewal often connected to

In Metlakatla, Alaska, audience members join in the dancing of this Tsimshian dance troupe at a potlatch, a ceremony that includes feasting, music, speeches, singing, dancing, and gifts for the guests. Such events are held to bear witness to and celebrate a wide variety of occasions including the payment of a debt, a wedding, a funeral, or the building of a house. Performance here builds and cements community relations.

© Lawrence Migdale/Pix



## The Audience and the Actor: The Invisible Bond

Unlike a television or movie audience, the live theatre audience always participates in some way in a performance. In fact, the level of audience participation can be anywhere on a continuum from community creation and participation to total separation of audience and performer.

fertility and rites of spring. This indicates that theatrical activity is linked with the continuation of community and the affirmation of the beliefs that sustain a culture's well-being.

In some cultures **shamans**, priests or priestesses, are charged with communicating with the spirit world on behalf of the community to bring peace and prosperity to the populace, or healing to the sick. They may induce spirits to possess them as part of this communication, providing their own bodies as vessels through which spirits manifest themselves to the group. Donning a mask or costume or holding a particular object associated with a spirit often serves as a path to possession. Shamans in a state of possession may move, speak, and in every way act like the spirit that possesses them, an image that parallels the work of the actor. While some shamans give themselves over to irrational powers and enter a paranormal state, others carefully plan the elements of their performance. It can be argued that this aesthetic consciousness turns the performance into both a theatrical and a religious event. Such developments can be found in Native American shamanistic rites and throughout Asia, Australia, and Africa. The Buryat people of Siberia and Mongolia have incorporated shamanistic elements into contemporary theatre forms, demonstrating the coexistence of the sacred and secular in performance.

In many cultures religious events offer an opportunity to enact stories from a group's mytho-historical past. Such presentations may be necessary to ensure the health of the community and its members or to effect a particular transition—an individual's passage from childhood to adulthood, such as the Apache puberty drama, or a seasonal shift from winter to spring. They may serve as a means of passing on oral her-

itage or perpetuating values and beliefs, and as a form of communal and sacred entertainment.

Some scholars believe that the roots of theatre lie in storytelling, a universal cultural activity that passes on a community's shared cultural experiences and knowledge. Entertaining narrators naturally embellish their tales by taking on the voices, facial expressions, and mannerisms of different characters, and may even add props, costume pieces, and physical movement to help bring the action to life. Through these additions, storytelling blossoms into theatrical presentation.

Some suggest that the origins of theatre lie in dance, where physical movement and mimed action gave expression to ideas before developed language. Early expressive movement in imitation of animals and people may have led to further transformations and elaborations, and later to dramatic content. The presence of dance in ritual links it to the development of theatre.

It is unlikely that any single practice gave birth to the theatre, which embraces all of these elements and is influenced by so many traditions. It is more constructive to understand the development of theatrical activity

as a movement along a continuum in response to the needs of communities to express their deepest concerns, to teach their members, and to ensure the community's survival through performance.



At this Buddhist Tsam festival in Himachal Pradesh, India, monks wearing papier maché masks and ornate costumes represent Guru Padmasambhava and his Eight Emanations. In India, Tibet, Nepal, and Mongolia, monks perform masked dances as part of their sacred duties.

© Lindsay Heberd/CORBIS



Scholars believe that many forms of theatre evolved from religious ritual in which everyone present was a participant and the intended audience was the invisible divinity. When one member of the group first steps out of a communal role to perform for the others, theatre appears in its embryonic form. By claiming the role of the actor, the performer also creates the audience. Over time, as the roles become more clearly divided by function—audience, performer, playwright—we have the development of the theatrical form. In this model, theatre is deeply tied to its communal roots, with the actor and the audience emerging from the same tightly knit group and held together by an invisible bond. In some ways, the theatre is always about community—the community of artists that create it, the community of spectators that observe it, and the union of both groups in the moment of performance.

Even today, when the roles of actor and audience feel so distinct, they are still codependent in the creation of theatre. Actors on stage can feel the audience's reactions and consciously or unconsciously adjust the performance accordingly. If the audience is laughing, an actor will wait until the laughter has died down to speak the next line. If the audience is quiet and unresponsive, an actor might unconsciously push or work harder to get the audience to react. An unexpected noise such as the ring of a cellphone or a sneeze might cause an actor to lose focus for a moment. In many performance traditions in which participation of the community is required, actors may direct all their energy toward heightening the audience involvement. Theatre performers are always playing in relation to the audience as its members laugh, cry, sigh, and breathe together. The live actor–audience interaction is one of the special thrills of the theatre for both performers and spectators, and it pulls actors back to the theatre despite lucrative film careers.

## *The Audience Is a Community*

In some places around the world, the audience still comes from a tightly knit community linked by shared values and history outside the theatre. In other places, when you take a seat in a theatre auditorium, or gather around street performers, or join a dancing crowd, you become part of a temporary community tied together only for the duration of the performance. Either way, this assimilation into a group empowers you. You can influence the actions of others around you, and they can influence yours. We all have felt how much easier it is to be openly responsive when we are part of a crowd than when we are alone. Imagine screaming at a sporting event if you were the only spectator. You are more likely to laugh out loud when others are laughing as well. There is a special freedom that comes from being an audience member, just as there are special constraints.

Many factors can affect the degree of interaction among audience members. The spacial configuration of the theatre and lighting can contribute to a heightened awareness of other people's responses. Performances outdoors in daylight tend to make us feel part of a crowd. But even in darkened theatres with the audience all facing the stage, we can sense an atmosphere in “the **house**”—the term theatre people use for the collective audience—that sets an emotional mood of the spectators. It is so palpable that performers can feel the audience even before a performance begins. Stage managers often report backstage before curtain that it feels like “a good house” tonight, commenting on the invisible currents of energy circulating among the audience members. Actors can sense the audience as a group from the stage immediately, and they adjust their performances accordingly. The audience is the one thing that changes completely every night, and because of the interplay between actor and audience, no two performances are ever exactly alike.

## Audience Members Construct Meaning as Individuals

Although the audience is usually addressed as a group by theatre artists, an audience, like any community, is made up of individuals with varying backgrounds and points of view. In close-knit societies, with shared values and histories, the differences among audience members may be less marked, but nonetheless, no two people bring the same set of life experiences to a performance, and each audience member perceives a theatrical event through a personal lens. Because audiences are collections of individuals with different pasts, every audience will respond in a unique way.

Our personal histories always influence how we react as audience members in many ways. If you are watching a performance from a culture outside of your own, you may not understand its nuances, or point of view, or performance style. If you have recently gone through a traumatic event such as the death of a parent, you might have a particularly strong or empathetic reaction to a play addressing this subject. If you are seeing a play or a performance tradition you have studied, you will measure this production against how you imagined it. If you are an experienced theatre-goer, you might not be as impressed by a lavish set or spectacular scenic change as a novice would. If you are attending a play that you have already seen, you may find yourself comparing the interpretations, directing, acting, and design. All of these individual experiences will affect your response, just as taking this class will probably make you a very different audience member in the future.

### Personal Identity and the Construction of Meaning

Our personal histories, including our age, culture, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, education, and economic or social class, play a part in our response to a performance. Usually theatre attempts to bridge the space between audience members' personal experience and the content of a performance through the creation of **empathy**, the capacity to identify emotionally with the characters on stage. Sometimes theatre artists



**Photo 2.1**

In this production of *The Blacks: A Clown Show* by Jean Genet, levels of reality were confused as the black–white political conflict that is the subject of this play is realized through the direct confrontation of white audience members by black actors. This action reversed the traditional power structure between blacks and whites. At some performances white spectators were traumatized by the psychological assault of the drama. Directed by Christopher McElroen for the Classical Theatre of Harlem.

Courtesy of *The Classical Theatre of Harlem, Inc.*, photo by Richard Termine

choose to exploit these differences for social or political reasons. Whether through empathy or distance, the goal is always to increase our understanding of others like or unlike ourselves.

The Free Southern Theater's 1968 production of *Slave Ship* by Amiri Baraka (b. 1934; also known as Leroi Jones), enacted a history of African Americans in the United States and deliberately divided its audience along racial lines. A symbolic slave ship was constructed in the middle of the large playing area, with close seating on all sides. The hold of the ship, where slave bodies were piled in cramped quarters, was eye level with the audience, magnifying the inhuman conditions on board. During an enacted slave auction, female slaves were stripped topless and thrust at white men in the audience, who were asked what they thought the women were worth. Many white audience members were so disturbed by this aggressive confrontation with history that they left at midpoint; others wished they had. At the end of the piece, cast members, invoking black power movements, invited black audience members to join them in encircling the white audience, while shouting for violent revolution. At many performances, black audience members, feeling empowered by the performance, joined the cast in shouting and intimidating white spectators. Many white audience members felt threatened and angry that they had paid to be abused, or felt helpless to express their sympathy with the blacks in an atmosphere of hostility. This play was meant to provoke different responses from different audience members to teach the lessons of history, and racial background could not help but influence the audience's experience of the play. A 2003 production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks* by the Classical Theatre of Harlem used the same techniques to polarize the audience along racial lines and drive home similar points (see Photo 2.1). Once again, many white audience members were visibly shaken by the direct confrontation.

### Challenges and Choices

Should there be limits on how actors treat unsuspecting audience members, especially when the action is confrontational?

#### Photo 2.2

Note the images and symbols of Chicano culture in Cherrie Moraga's *Heroes and Saints* at Brava! for Women in the Arts, San Francisco, directed by Albert Takazauckas. Actors: Hector Correa and Jaime Lujan. Courtesy of Brava Theater Center, photo by David M. Allen



Chicana playwright Cherrie Moraga (b. 1952) focuses on the problems of the community of Mexican American migrant farmworkers in California. In her play, *Heroes and Saints*, the bodiless central character Cerezita represents Chicano children with birth defects from pesticides used in the fields (see Photo 2.2). The play's treatment of homosexuality within the Chicano community interweaves sexuality with religious symbolism and seeks to expose the oppressive aspects of Catholicism. Moraga liberally mixes English and Spanish dialogue, reflecting the actual speech patterns of the Chicano community. The play draws heavily on Chicano cultural images, and audience members unfamiliar with Spanish or with the social world Moraga depicts might feel lost or unable to appreciate her reworking of cultural symbols. Those familiar with that community might feel deeply touched by the play. These charged themes provoke different responses based on sexual preference and religiosity, even within the Chicano community.

Eve Ensler's popular play *Vagina Monologues* (see Chapter 1), dealing with such an intimate part of the female anatomy, elicits different responses from audience members based on their gender, even creating a sisterhood among women in the



audience. Tim Miller's work (discussed in Chapter 6) speaks directly to issues of concern to the gay community.

Theatre experiences that address race, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, and gender seek to create awareness of the life conditions of people both like and unlike ourselves. What we take away from such provocative performances and what meaning we construct depends on how we filter the staged events through our personal histories. Theatre, the most public of all the arts, is also a private act with personal meaning.

## Audience Members Choose Focus

At a theatrical event, individual audience members possess a certain amount of autonomy to choose their focus and to control their personal experience of a performance. A theatre spectator sees the entire playing space and can choose to look anywhere. Lighting effects and other staging techniques can draw the audience's attention to one area or another, but spectators can still decide whether they want to watch the actor who is speaking or see the reaction of the actor who is listening. Where spectators choose to focus will affect their interpretation of a performance. This puts a burden on stage actors and directors to create a center of compelling dramatic action, which explains the heightened theatricality of stage acting. Compare this to film or television in which the director, through the camera lens, and the editor, with a cut, preselect what they want the audience to see and from what perspective.

Some stage directors take advantage of the audience's visual autonomy. They create productions with many stages and many events occurring at the same time and ask the audience to choose its own focus time and again. In Richard Schechner's (b. 1934) work with environmental theatre during the 1960s and 1970s, there was no demarcation between the audience space and the performance space, and simultaneous action occurred in many places. Actors engaged individual audience members, sometimes whispering dialogue in their ears. This required each member of the audience to actually construct the drama based on a completely individual experience.



**Photo 2.3**

Note the platform stages reminiscent of fairground booths. The audience can watch different scenes from various sides and angles. Some audience members stand to get a better view of action taking place at the opposite side of the playing area. The Théâtre du Soleil performing *1789* directed by Ariane Mnouchkine. Scenery by Roberto Moscoso and costumes by Françoise Tournafond. Cartoucherie de Vincennes, Paris, 1970.

© Martine Franck/Magnum Photos

In 1970–1971 the French troupe the Théâtre du Soleil created *1789* in the company's huge old ammunition factory on the outskirts of Paris. Its scenes from the French Revolution took place on five stages surrounding the audience creating a fairground atmosphere with multiple focuses. The audience chose where to look just as they might at an outdoor fair (see Photo 2.3). One particularly poignant moment used two stages at opposite ends of the space to represent the physical and cultural distance that separated Louis XVI, the French king, from the illiterate peasants in the countryside. While the king proclaimed that he wanted to respond to his subjects' needs, the peasants had no means of communicating with him.

## Conventions of Audience Response

When you attend the theatre, most likely you are not aware that you have entered into a silent contract determining how you will behave during the performance and what your relationship will be to the theatrical event and the performers. You are unaware of this agreement because, in general, audiences conduct themselves according to time-honored traditions that are observed by spectators and actors alike. When these rules are broken, on purpose or by accident, as when an actor planted in the audience interrupts the stage action or an audience member leaps uninvited onto the stage, it can be exciting or disturbing, but it is always provocative, because it is a violation of the prevalent theatrical conventions and audience expectations. A performance constructs its conventions of audience response through cues given by the actors, the spatial arrangement, directorial concept, lighting, and set design. In the chapters ahead, we will look at how each of these elements determines the role of the audience.

Although the audience's presence is a vital part of theatrical performance, the nature of the audience's participation may vary from place to place, society to society, era to era, and even at different kinds of events or in different venues within the same culture. At evening performances of the opera in the Roman arena in Verona, Italy, during the overture, the audience lights small candles and the entire arena is lit up like a giant birthday cake (see Photo 2.4). The locals in the upper tiers picnic during the performance, passing around chicken legs, salami, and wine. Those in the high-priced seats, however, behave more like opera house audiences in New York, London, or Paris, where people come to be seen in their designer best and await intermission to sip champagne. Although eating is taboo during most performances inside opera houses and can disturb the performers and other audience members, when the New York Metropolitan Opera performs in Central Park, audience members feel free to behave more like the audience in Verona, picnicking on the grass and drinking wine. We see that expected audience behavior can be different for the same kind of performance in different settings.

Around the world today, in countries outside of Western Europe and America, most theatrical traditions expect vocal audience response of one kind or another during the show. In the Japanese *kabuki* theatre, at the climactic moments of a play, the fans yell out phrases such as "I've been waiting for this my whole life!" or "Do it the way your father did it!" Through this yelling they support their favorite actors, cheering them on to masterful execution the way a baseball fan in America might yell "strike him out" to a pitcher during a game. At performances of Chinese opera, whenever a performer does something praiseworthy, members of the audience will applaud and shout "Hao, hao" (Good, good). They do not feel compelled to hold their applause until the end. In African concert party theatre, audience participation is expected, and spectators are invited, even drawn, into the performance by the actors who encourage them to hiss the villains and warn them of danger. Actors may engage in a call and response with the audience by repeating simple questions about the plot for the audience to answer. When these kinds of performances are

**Photo 2.4**

At the Roman Arena in Verona, Italy, audience members play their part in the operatic spectacle by lighting small candles during the overture. The entire arena is aglow in an audience-created lighting effect.

*Photo by Gianfranco Fainello, Fondazione Arena di Verona. All rights are exclusively reserved.*

played to spectators unfamiliar with their expected role, it can feel like a rock band performing for a classical music audience. The performances can seem lifeless without the expected audience response, and actors who have come to rely on the vocal support of their admirers can feel let down. If you are unfamiliar with these customs, you will surely not be able to fully appreciate a performance that depends on your interaction. You may feel out of place or unsure how to conduct yourself. One of the most important things to learn about the theatre is how to be an appropriate audience member.

## Audience Conventions in Western Theatre History

In Europe and America today, and in theatres in the Western tradition around the world, most often we expect to be silent during a performance and to hold our applause until the end. Sometime after we take our seats, the lights dim and a hush settles over the crowd as we become quiet and attentive listeners. Although this is the prevalent convention in Western theatre today, it was not always the case.

### The Once-Active Audience

The outdoor daylight performances in ancient Greece took place in a festive atmosphere in which social interaction, eating, and drinking were all part of a daylong theatre event. In ancient Rome, theatre was performed at religious festivals that offered an enormous array of entertainments. Both sacred and secular, performances were meant to please the gods as much as the human spectators. Because theatre had to compete with chariot races and wild animal fights for its audience's attention, it was common for spectators to walk out in the middle of a play if they thought that something more interesting might be happening at another venue. The prologues of ancient Roman comedies often admonish the audience to pay attention to the show.



Throughout the Middle Ages, theatre was very much a community affair. Audiences would gather around wandering players in town squares and interact with each other and the performers. The Christian cycle plays that began in the fourteenth century and depicted stories from the Old and New Testaments were projects that engaged the entire town in preparation. The audience who had shared in the creation of the piece, providing sets, costumes, props, and other needs, attended in an open spirit of camaraderie to watch their fellow townsmen perform.

An open exchange between actors and the public was part of the spirit of the theatre even as performances became more formal events performed by professional actors in theatre buildings during the sixteenth century. In his own time, Shakespeare's plays were performed before a rowdy audience who booed, hissed, cheered, conversed, ate, drank, and even threw food at the performers, offering one explanation for the rat infestation in theatres of the period. Many believe that the open roof of the Elizabethan playhouse was a means to let the stench of food, drink, and unwashed bodies escape. If we remember that Shakespeare wrote for a popular audience, we can appreciate the earthy humor, double entendres, and theatrical devices that made him a crowd pleaser.

In late seventeenth-century Europe, as theatre moved increasingly indoors, the behavior of the audience was somewhat tempered, but spectators were still actively engaged in the event. Indoor theatre in this period was a social event for an elite audience. Candelabra lit up the audience as well as the stage, and the horseshoe-shaped auditorium made it as easy to be seen by others as to see the show. Those seated on the long sides of the horseshoe actually had to turn their heads to the side to see the stage; when they looked straight ahead or down, they looked at each other and could easily observe who else was in the audience, what they were wearing, and who were their escorts, feeding the social gossip of the time. Some spectators even sat onstage when additional seats were added to raise revenues, bringing them even more attention.

#### Photo 2.5

In 1830, audience riots followed the first performance of Victor Hugo's *Hernani*, pictured here in a painting by Albert Besnard. Hugo's romantic play broke with the stage conventions of neoclassical tragedy, and the romantics and the classicists drew battle lines as to which form should dominate. The horseshoe shape of the theatre enabled those in the circular balconies to communicate with the spectators in the orchestra, facilitating the shouting match.

© Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY



# History

IN PERSPECTIVE

## THE ASTOR PLACE RIOTS

**D**uring the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, theatre was the people's art. Passionate audiences protested vociferously over issues of concern from ticket prices to theatrical forms and the treatment of stars. Some of the public outrage addressed at controversial films today would seem tame in contrast.

Lingering American antagonism against the British and the "highbrow" Americans who identified with them may have been at the root of the violent Astor Place Riots that erupted on May 10, 1849, at the Astor Place Opera House in New York City, ostensibly the result of a professional rivalry between the American actor Edwin Forrest (1806–1872), and the English actor William Charles Macready (1793–1873). Macready's subtle and intellectual style contrasted with Forrest's vigorous acting and muscular bearing that many felt embodied American democratic ideals. Forrest's portrayal of common heroes like the Roman Spartacus were widely admired by popular American audiences. The bad blood between the two actors began in 1845 during one of Forrest's tours in England when, blaming Macready for his lack of success, Forrest openly hissed Macready during a performance. Their simultaneous performances in New York transplanted their animosity to the United States and translated into a call to arms for homegrown American culture.

Forrest's admirers assailed Macready with critical newspaper articles and threw objects at him during performances. After a disastrous opening night in New York, when audience members threw chairs at the stage along with the usual vegetables and fruit, Macready was ready to return home. Persuaded by a group of powerful New Yorkers, he continued his run in defiance of the treatment received. On hearing that Macready would continue on, Forrest's supporters drummed up a nationalist fury against the production. At the next performance the house was full to capacity, and policemen and crowds of thousands gathered outside the theatre in protest. When Macready walked onstage, the gathering erupted beyond the control of the police. The crowd outside threw paving stones at the building and pushed to get in, and Macready barely escaped with his life. The national guard was called in from a nearby armory, and total mayhem ensued when soldiers shot at the crowd. According to various accounts, the Astor Place Riots left between twenty and thirty-one dead, over one hundred wounded, and the theatre in ruins.

In an attempt to restore order, National Guardsmen at Astor Place shoot at rioters throwing rocks at the theatre where the English actor William Charles Macready performs.

© Bettmann/CORBIS



In eighteenth-century London, spectators often arrived early and entertained each other before the show began. In his *London Journal*, James Boswell recounts how on one such occasion he imitated a cow to the delight of other audience members, although they were not as taken with his imitation of a chicken. The plays of the Restoration and early eighteenth century, with their depiction of an artificial social world with pretentious manners and behavior, can be seen as mirrors of the audience in the theatre.

European plays of the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries were punctuated with dramatic devices addressed directly to the audience such as **asides**—short comments that revealed a character’s inner thoughts often to comic effect, **soliloquies**—lengthy speeches through which a character revealed state of mind, and dazzling poetic **monologues** or speeches. The audience might erupt in appreciative applause after a monologue or soliloquy, much the way they do today at the opera after an aria.

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatre, reflecting the democratic revolutions occurring in the outside world, increasingly included popular entertainments and easily accessible drama. American audiences were some of the rowdiest of all. They exercised their democratic freedom at theatre events and brought tomatoes, cabbages, and rotten eggs with them to throw at the actors if they didn’t like the performance. Sometimes they tore up the seats, throwing those as well, and on occasion they were moved to riot. At a good performance they cheered ecstatically and cried out for encores; an actor would have to repeat a speech as many times as the crowd demanded.

## The Rise of the Passive Audience

With this long history of involved audiences, how did it come to pass that today, in Western Europe and the Americas, the audience is generally more passive? In fact, the quiet, passive spectator is a relatively recent historical phenomenon and dates only from the late nineteenth century, as a result of a theatrical style known as **realism**. In realistic theatre, the audience is asked to accept the stage world as a believable alternate reality where things happen much as they would in life, and people behave in seemingly natural ways. This is achieved when the actors conduct the lives of their characters as though the audience were not watching, in spaces designed to look like their counterparts in the real world; in turn, the audience, representing a different reality, agrees not to intrude on the imaginary world on the stage to preserve its perfect illusion. This creates the convention of an invisible **fourth wall** separating the stage from the audience.

We should remember that realism is not any more *real* than any other style of theatre. In fact, actors are not talking in their everyday voices or volumes; they are not any more like their characters than actors in nonrealistic plays; the sets and costumes are just as artificial as those that present an abstract or poeticized style. What realism provides is the *illusion of the real*, and that is as much an illusion as every other stage world. Because realism came to dominate the American theatre, we refer to the nonrealistic theatre as stylized; but realism is as much a style—a manner of presenting the world through accepted conventions—as any other approach to the theatre.

Realism as a style resulted from a confluence of forces: the ideas of Darwin that presented human beings as objects of scientific study; the birth of sociology and psychology that sought to objectively observe human behavior on every social rung; a surge of playwrights interested in applying these ideas to the theatre; and advances in stage lighting—first gas and later electric—that permitted the darkening of an auditorium to separate the audience while simultaneously shining a focused light on the stage to illuminate human behavior as though it were under the lens of a microscope. The advances in lighting enabled the actors to move away from the front of the stage and behind the proscenium arch (see Chapter 9).

As more and more playwrights chose to write in this realistic style, it came to dominate the Western theatre, and its impact on acting, directing, and design can be seen to this day. Theatre architecture altered to reflect social change and to facilitate this new approach. The horseshoe shape for theatres was abandoned in favor of a theatre in which all the seats faced forward, focusing the audience on the stage and altering its relationship to the performance. Economic motives pushed theatre managers to place upholstered armchair seating in front of the stage in the pit, in what we now call the orchestra section. Where rowdy lower class spectators once stood or sat on backless benches, wealthier audiences now sat in expensive reserved seating, changing the atmosphere in the theatre.



## Aesthetic Distance

Peculiarly, the more the conventions of realism separated the audience from the actors, and the more passively the audience watched, the more they lost their **aesthetic distance**, the ability to observe a work of art with a degree of detachment and objectivity. Realism drew audiences into the performance. The presentation of a world so like their own, inhabited by characters whose concerns and problems so closely paralleled their own experience, heightened the level of audience identification and emotional involvement with the characters on the stage. Styles other than realism still provide a constant reminder of the fiction before us, and this awareness enables us to separate psychologically from the work.

Every theatrical experience sets up an emotional relationship with the audience that is regulated by theatrical convention. This can range from icy dispassion to overwhelming emotional involvement. Some amount of distance is always necessary; without it, we would be unable to discern that the events unfolding on the stage are a fiction and that the actors are really playing characters who live only for the duration of the performance. Distance maintains the audience's sanity, or else we would all be leaping onto the stage to stop Romeo from killing himself. Theatre critics from Plato to the present have debated the importance of aesthetic distance and its moral implications. Many have feared that exposing the audience to violent or sexually explicit acts and offensive language can foster such behavior. Others have argued that aesthetic distance permits a purging of our aggressive desires through art and enactment. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) referred to this emotional release as **catharsis**. These concerns are echoed in today's discussions of violence in the media.

### Challenges and Choices

Is the witnessing of violent and disturbing images and language onstage so provocative that it requires government regulation, or should audience members be left to regulate their own aesthetic distance?

## Rebelling against Realism's Passive Audience

As soon as realism became an accepted convention, the continuing cycle of tradition giving way to innovation produced experimental artists on a divergent course. From the turn of the twentieth century on, theatre practitioners have been seeking ways to tear down realism's fourth wall and reengage the audience in performance, creating new sets of conventions in the process. Some have simply sought ways to reinvigorate the stage, such as Thornton Wilder's use of a character called the Stage Manager who speaks directly to the audience as he sets the scene, narrates events, and introduces the characters of *Our Town*. Other theatre practitioners manipulate aesthetic distance for their own political or aesthetic ends. Avant-garde theatre artists have even toyed with the audience's aesthetic distance, confusing them as to what is *real* and what is *pretend*, which is an unsettling experience. In *The Last Supper* (2002), Ed Schmidt invited the audience into his home, promising them a wonderful dinner as part of the event. Bantering with the audience in seemingly unscripted remarks as he cooks in his kitchen, he realizes he's forgotten to defrost the fish and has run out of ingredients. The audience settles for cheese and crackers while he orders out for pizza. Sitting in the intimacy of the actor's home with real rumbling stomachs, the audience could not distinguish where the real person left off and the role began and were baffled as to what was true and what was false, raising questions about perceptions of reality.

# Political Theatre: Moving the Audience to Action

Playwrights have used the theatre for political commentary as far back as the ancient Greek comic playwright Aristophanes (448–c. 380 B.C.E.), who satirized the people and institutions of ancient Athens. However, in the early twentieth century, a different kind



**Photo 2.6**

Calavera drums up an audience for a Teatro Campesino performance in Fresno, circa 1969. Pictured: Feliz Alvarez, Chale Martinez, Manuel Pickett, Lupe Valdez, Phil Esparza. Courtesy of El Teatro Campesino

of political theatre aimed at activating audiences for social change in the real world took root. Such political theatre places special demands on its audience, as its goal is to spur them to real action. Practitioners experiment with strategies for audience activation adapted to specific circumstances and political goals.

### Agit-Prop: Activating the Audience

**Agit-prop** (from *agitation* and *propaganda*) was an early form of political theatre developed during the 1920s in Russia and later adopted abroad. Born in the Marxist fervor of the Russian Revolution, it supported the workers' struggle for political, social, and economic justice. In the spirit of the ancient town criers, agit-prop brought the day's news to illiterate peasants and factory workers to enlist their support for the massive economic and social changes in the aftermath of the revolution. As songs and skits on relevant issues were added, these presentations grew into "living newspapers." Agit-prop reached out to its audiences, playing where ordinary people gathered, in workers' cafes and community halls, expressing important information in a short, simple, explicit, and entertaining way.

Agit-prop became a model for political theatre in many countries. German troupes such as the Red Megaphone incorporated group declamatory speeches and cabaret-style skits into their performances. During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), players used agit-prop to inspire the people to fight against fascism. The Federal Theatre Project, organized to provide jobs for unemployed theatre artists during the Great Depression in the United States, performed *Living Newspapers* from 1935 to 1939. These used documentary material to inform the American public of pressing social concerns. In the 1960s, groups such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe and El Teatro Campesino used agit-prop techniques to fight for civil rights, for immigrants' rights, and against the Vietnam War. The Mime Troupe mixed the didacticism of agit-prop with popular American and European theatrical forms like vaudeville, *commedia dell'arte*, and circus clowning to create extended outdoor plays that brought home a political message and urged the audience to adopt a position. Teatro Campesino, a Chicano group founded by Luis Valdez (b. 1940), brought theatre to immigrant farmworkers by performing in churches and on

the back of a flat-bed truck in crop fields in short plays called *actos*, improvised skits that explained to California's immigrant farmworkers why they should join the Farm Worker's Union and demand better conditions. Many *actos* ended with the actors exhorting the audience to call for "La Huelga" (a strike). The performances were accompanied by Chicano songs that served to disseminate information, much like the early Russian living newspapers.

## Bertolt Brecht: Challenging the Audience

Throughout the world, theatre artists look to the work of the German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) for a model of how to engage the audience. Brecht wanted to turn his audience members into critical viewers who, like fans at a sporting event, would think about what they were seeing, take sides, comment on the action, and come up with alternative courses of action.

Brecht built on the work of German director Erwin Piscator (1893–1966), an early pioneer in political theatre who developed a series of stage devices that increased the audience's aesthetic distance and prevented them from becoming emotionally absorbed in the play, so they could see the political issues more clearly. Piscator abolished fourth wall realistic stage sets that had come to be the standard, and replaced them with slide projections, film, and placards naming time and location, often providing a historical backdrop for contemporary issues.

Brecht extended these ideas. Mood lighting was replaced by utilitarian illumination to provide visibility. He revealed the means of creating theatrical illusion, such as light fixtures, ropes, and pulleys to keep the audience fully aware that they were watching a theatrical event. Brecht wrote plays (which we will discuss in the next chapter) that could utilize these staging techniques. The action is interrupted by narratives, projections, and songs that comment on the situation and whose music and content are frequently jarringly dissonant. The finales of his plays often leave the situation unresolved or directly ask the audience to come up with a resolution. Brecht worked with a troupe to develop a style of acting that could enable the actor to comment on the character, not become the character.



**Photo 2.7**

The map that serves as backdrop and the puppet-like figure of Hitler are both devices that create a distancing effect in this production of Bertolt Brecht's *Schweyk in the Second World War* directed by Richard Eyre at the Olivier Theatre, London.

© ArenaPal/Topham/The Image Works



Through these and other techniques, Brecht hoped to achieve what he called the *verfremdungseffekt*, translated as **distancing** or **alienation effect**, a separation of the audience emotionally from the dramatic action. The audience is thus an observer, able to decide the best course of action to resolve social ills. As politically motivated theatre practitioners around the world adopted Brecht's methods, these devices became a part of our theatrical vocabulary and no longer have the same startling effect on audiences; artists therefore continue to look for new techniques and strategies.

### Augusto Boal: Involving the Audience

Brazilian theatre theorist and practitioner Augusto Boal (b. 1930) extended Brecht's ideas in his theatre of the oppressed, a theatrical form in which all barriers between actors and audience are destroyed, returning theatre to its communal roots in which we can all become participants in social drama. He turns passive spectators into active "spect-actors" who don't just think about alternative solutions, but try them out onstage as rehearsals for social revolution.

Under the umbrella of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal developed different theatrical strategies for different situations and audiences. In *forum theatre*, members of a community create a short piece about shared problems that they perform for other spect-actors who are invited to stop the show at any time, take over roles, and try out new solutions. In his *invisible theatre*, provocative dramas about burning issues are enacted in normal everyday settings like subway cars or restaurants, as if they were happening in real life. The unsuspecting public, unaware that the action is rehearsed and planned, unwittingly join the debate or action and become actors themselves. In one piece performed on a boat in Sweden, a young woman pretended to be pregnant and in labor to catalyze a discussion about the shortcomings of the health care system. During a term spent as a city councilman in Brazil, Boal worked on *legislative theatre*, a form of *forum theatre* designed to reveal issues of primary concern to the community to guide political policy.

Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* was originally designed to reach the poor of Brazil, but now there are centers for the dissemination of his methods all over the world. Local practitioners throughout South America, Asia, Australia, and Africa have adapted his methods to their pressing social problems and audiences. In the more bourgeois cultures of the United States, Europe, and Canada, Boal's ideas have been used psychotherapeutically to address the oppressive forces within our psyches, drawing on a collection of techniques called *The Rainbow of Desire*.

### The Living Theatre: Confronting the Audience

During the 1960s many theatrical groups in the United States and abroad spoke out against the Vietnam War and sought new ways to galvanize their audiences against the war and the political-industrial complex that supported it. One of the most innovative and influential groups was The Living Theatre, founded by Judith Malina (b. 1926) and Julien Beck (1925–1985). The company has a long history of important productions, beginning with their staging of Jack Gelber's drama about drug addiction, *The Connection* in 1959, and Kenneth Brown's *The Brig* in 1963, which placed a mesh fence between the audience and the dehumanizing action of military prisons depicted onstage. The group lived out their anarchist politics by moving to Europe and living as a nomadic collective. They created *Paradise Now* in 1968 to make audiences aware of the restraints social and political institutions imposed on individual freedom and to conscript spectators into renouncing these structures in favor of building an alternative "paradise" community. Goading audience members to shake them from their complacency, the group used

# Performance

## IN PERSPECTIVE

### ADAPTING POLITICAL STRATEGIES TO LOCAL AUDIENCES

In countries the world over, political theatre groups develop strategies and find theatrical forms that can speak to local audiences and issues. When the Peruvian troupe Yuyachkani discovered that its early pieces about land reform and miners' strikes did not connect with its audiences, its director Miguel Rubio incorporated traditional celebrations, masks, songs, dances, and costumes from the communities of miners and peasants they sought to activate. They now begin a show with a fiesta that is interrupted by a dramatic conflict.

The Parivartan Theatre Project in the tribal area of Khedbrahma in Gujarat, India, uses local villagers as performers and incorporates traditional songs and folk theatre conventions to address tribal attitudes toward women and issues of domestic violence, dowry death, and infanticide, which plague the region. The first part of a presentation enacts a well-known folk tale related to the treatment of women, and the second part retells the story in a contemporary context. The players go from house to house to announce the show and after the presentation disperse into the crowd to discuss the play with the villagers in small groups.

Sistern, a theatre collective in Jamaica, presents plays in Creole by and for working-class women on topics such as women's work, incest, poverty, and violence against women. In their workshops they use improvisation, oral histories, traditional ring games, folk tales, and other techniques to address problems, find solutions, and turn the women's experiences into educational performances. Their 1978 production *Bellywoman Bangarang*, about teenage pregnancy, was staged in the audience as a further means of reaching out to spectators.

In times of political repression and censorship, a special bond can form between theatres and their audiences as artists seek to be the community's mouthpiece. Under President Suharto's oppressive dictatorship, Indonesia's N. Riantiarno and his group, Teater Koma, addressed Jakarta's urban middle class and critiqued contemporary society and politics in a blend of Western-style structured scripts, Brechtian aesthetics, and musical theatre with influences from Indonesia's indigenous and more improvisational folk forms. In *Time Bomb (Bom Waktu, 1982)*, audiences watched the struggles of Jakarta's urban slum dwellers play out underneath a fancy restaurant where wealthy diners eat a sumptuous meal. In the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos's martial law and severe theatrical censorship (1972–1986), amateur groups, student groups, and professional urban and rural theatres all took an active role in denouncing the regime's corruption and use of torture. In 1979 PETA (The Philippine Educational Theatre Association) transformed the folk *panuluyan*, a Christmastime street procession in which Joseph and Mary search for an inn. In their version, seeing the slum conditions, Joseph and Mary join forces with the down-and-out of the city. In 1984, on Human Rights Day, students and faculty from the University of the Philippines performed *The Nation's Oratorio (Ortoroyo Ng Bayan)*. While the audience sang and chanted, the actors read out articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, enacting scenes that illustrated its abuse under the current regime.

Yuyachkani grabs the attention of villagers in Quinua, Peru with festive costumes, musicians, and stiltwalkers.

*Courtesy of Casa Yuyachkani, Peru*



# Artists

## IN PERSPECTIVE

### *In Their Own Words*

#### **BILL TALEN, AKA REVEREND BILLY**

*Bill Talen is the author and actor who performs as the televangelist Reverend Billy. He began as a sidewalk preacher in Times Square in the late 1990s, to fight against the "Disneyfication" of the neighborhood. Since then, he and his "Stop Shopping Gospel Choir" have toured a range of transnational chain stores, especially Wal-Mart and Starbucks, to preach against mindless consumerism and the eradication of small local businesses. He was arrested and sentenced to jail for his performance inside a Los Angeles Starbucks in 2004.*

#### ■ How did you come to a form of theatre that involves audience participation?

Before I began to walk out into the audience to touch people on their heads and hands, I was always fascinated with the sounds and seat shifting an audience makes. When I was a regular stage actor, and then later a monologist/storyteller, I would listen to the sounds of the audience as if it was a single body—all those sighs and unconscious chuckles and levels of breathing.

#### ■ How do you get reluctant audiences to participate?

The notion of the audience's involvement in our Stop Shopping rituals speaks to a general hunger for a group spirituality that eludes fundamentalism. One mark of fundamentalism, whether from organized religion or the most powerful church of all, The Church of Consumption, is the absence of any humor. If you pretend that you know all the answers to the questions of life and

death, you can't joke about them. In the anarcho-faith that we prefer, serious questions of life and death are just hilarious. The reluctance to shout "Amen!" or "Change-a-lujah!" is difficult to maintain when people all around you are laughing. That is how the community is created, through the ritual sharing of the joke and the defeat of socializing seriousness. In our service nowadays, this "mockery" lasts a few seconds. All we need is the cultural frame, which we then break and get on to more complex matters.

#### ■ Did art drive your politics or politics drive your art?

Desperation at the Disneyfication of my neighborhood in Times Square was the driving force. In more recent years, the onslaught of Wal-Mart and Starbucks—and after 9/11, Halliburton, and Bechtel—have aroused whatever we have left for our own defense—all the art or politics we can muster. But no one has time to stop and name one gesture "artful" and one bit of writing "political." Transnational capitalists come at you, so to save your community you have to drop those categories of theater, politics, and religion, and just resist with all you've got.

Now we perform inside stores, in actions that we call "retail interventions." It could be argued that politics drove this decision because going undercover, and inside, is "behind the lines." (And anyway, there's no place to protest outside, anymore.) But it could also be called more artful because there is no theatrical space more charged than a retail store in the Land of Consumption.

#### ■ Do your performances spawn other grassroots activism efforts?

There are Stop Shopping churches throughout the world. We stream sermons and songs through the church website, Revbilly.com. We try to "make place" by creating

#### **Challenges and Choices**

What is the audience's responsibility to the event? Must audience members accept the conventions of a performance, or can they refuse to participate as the show prescribes?

inflammatory political statements that brought spectators to their feet, and sometimes to the top of their seats, screaming back in anger. Company members then invited spectators to join them onstage and in their nomadic, tribal lifestyle.

The work of the Living Theatre became famous and inspired many theatre artists of the 1960s and after to adapt the group's techniques for their own purposes. The Living Theatre is still held up as an important example of engaged theatre and continues to perform today with pieces such as *Not in My Name*, a ritualistic action against the death penalty, enacted in Times Square in New York City on the eve of every state execution. In this piece, performers confront passers-by individually, avowing that they themselves will never kill and asking spectators for the same commitment, continuing their use of direct encounter to motivate an end to violence.



meta-communities through “ritual resistance.” We will ask all the church members in Melbourne to go to the 36 Starbucks there and put their hands on the cash registers and videotape themselves while they recite prayerfully the first paragraph of Chapter 3 of Jane Jacobs’s *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Then we stream this through the website to the faithful on other continents, who are watching this on their computers inside Starbucks. Finally, the churchgoers from the rest of the world perform their simultaneous reply. They also enact the Jane Jacobs sacred text, and their hands are also on the cash register, but we have asked them to do so in an Aussie accent if they can, as a signal of fondness. They loved it in Melbourne.

■ **What long-term impact do you think your performances have on audience members?**

We have larger live audiences now. People in Barcelona and London and California seem ready for their “credit card exorcism”

Reverend Billy with supporters preaching against the evils of Starbucks at the New York Halloween parade.

Copyright 2004 Fred Askew Photography. All rights reserved.

Source: Used with permission of Bill Talen, aka “Rev. Billy.”



when the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir steps off the bus. On the other hand, transnational capital, while so widely discredited, still expands and destroys. Revolution no longer has a Winter Palace to storm, or a Berlin Wall to tear down. Transnational capital, the great displacer, is everywhere and nowhere. It dazzles you and it dulls you. It comes at you in pixels, and secret police, and ten-story-high supermodels. We have to make defending our own neighborhoods, and our own psychological selves, as dramatic as the revolutions that come to us from history.

## Engaging the Audience Today

Today a new breed of activist artists is expanding on the methods of these pioneers to engage spectators in political activism responsive to contemporary issues. The Internet has provided a rapid way to contact large groups of participants and to call them to theatrical political action telling them when and where to show up. Reclaim the Streets, a group boasting participants in New York, London, and around the globe, turns street corners and subway cars into spontaneous parties to reclaim overregulated open spaces for general public use. Some performer-participants get messages via the Internet, while others simply become part of the show by walking down the street. The Surveillance Camera Players raise awareness of the loss of privacy in our daily lives by performing short, silent

pieces in public for surveillance cameras. Their performances point out the unobtrusive cameras that watch our every move.

At his “Church of Stop Shopping,” Bill Talen performs in the guise of Reverend Billy, a preacher who speaks out against consumer culture. Performances are mock revival meetings with left-wing politics rather than religion as their theme. During the course of his shows, Reverend Billy asks audience members to practice “stop-shopping” techniques such as discarding their credit cards. At the end of every piece, Reverend Billy leads the audience outside the theatre to take action in the real world. His audiences have walked to a community garden under threat by corporate development and planted seeds, and marched with him to picket the local Starbucks that had forced out neighborhood stores. Reverend Billy’s audience participation teaches spectators how grassroots activism can help local people take back control of their neighborhoods.

## From Provocation to Mainstream: The Evolution of a Convention

Although experimental and political theatre artists in the twentieth century first used audience participation as a form of rebellion against the passive bourgeois audience and other theatrical conventions of realism, tamer forms followed. The idea of the active spectator eventually left the realm of the avant-garde and became a firmly established convention.

Productions such as Off-Off-Broadway’s *Tony and Tina’s Wedding* (1988) treat audience members as guests at a wedding. They attend the church ceremony and walk as a group to the reception where they sit at tables and eat a full dinner, complete with champagne, as they watch Tony and Tina’s family relationships explode around them. A far cry from agit-prop theatre, the event is a fun night out and a novel date for both dinner and

### Photo 2.8

Original cast members, Rachel Benbow Murdy as Mia and Anna Wilson as Sander, perform among the audience in *The Donkey Show*, club El Flamingo, New York. Note the lively interaction with the involved crowd. Randy Weiner and Diane Paulus, creators and writers.

*Courtesy of and special thanks to Randy Weiner, Creator and Writer of THE DONKEY SHOW, Diane Paulus, Creator and Director of THE DONKEY SHOW and Keira Fromm Resident Director of Project 400 Theater Group and THE DONKEY SHOW.*



a show that has now become a national franchise with a website, gift certificates, and commercial performances in cities around the United States. The unusual way the production asks the audience to participate in the show continues to attract audiences.

*The Donkey Show* (1999), a retelling of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* using disco songs from the 1970s in place of Shakespeare's dialogue, also incorporates the audience into the action. Staged in an old disco club, the action takes place around spectators who are encouraged to buy drinks and dance just as they would at a club. The audience configuration continually changes as actors dance, sing, and perform moving through the crowd on a series of platforms. The dance party in the audience continues throughout the show, and on some nights goes on long after the actors have changed out of their costumes and gone home. The audience in this production hedonistically indulges their own pleasures as they mix with the actors.

Such mainstream performances demonstrate that what was once a defiant radical strategy to overturn prevailing conventions can evolve into a popular and accepted theatrical form. The participatory audience has entered our general culture as well, spawning interactive art in museums, galleries, and on the Internet.

## Meeting Theatre's Challenges

Although we often think of the theatre as a place of entertainment, the theatre poses special challenges to its audience. In the theatre, you must be attentive as you decide where to focus, or you will miss significant information. Theatre often depends on language more than a visual medium like film and therefore demands good listening skills. Sometimes you will be confronted by an unexpected theatrical style—difficult language, stylized movement, strange sets, and costumes might seem jarring—and you will need to remain open and try to adjust to the new form and how it communicates. Theatre, unlike television, is often imagistic and metaphorical, so the most important thing to bring to the theatre is your imagination.

Some productions ask spectators to make a special commitment by challenging them physically, emotionally, or intellectually. So-called “marathon performances” may



**Photo 2.9**

For this production of *Faust*, heavy demands were placed on the audience. Note the audience members standing and surrounding the action and the orange curtains that separate the playing spaces used for alternate scenes. The audience's frequent migrations between the spaces forced them to continually reorganize themselves, fostering social interactions. Goethe's *Faust*, Parts I and II, directed by Peter Stein, Berlin, Germany.

© Ruth Walz





**Photo 2.10**

Members of the Montana Shakespeare in the Parks company bring their performances to remote areas around the state and are housed by local families. Featured here is a performance of *Tartuffe* in Poker Jim Butte. The audience travels long distances to partake of this cultural event

© Ted Wood

tiny lights that bedeck the trees, is a magical experience in itself that prepares the spectator for the rest. As more and more urban theatre groups are priced out of downtown space, performances are occurring in out-of-the-way places and seedy areas, and making the trip becomes a test of faith in the product. Many who live in remote regions consider a theatrical event worthy of a pilgrimage. The annual tour of Montana Shakespeare in the Parks takes it to remote areas of the state, where ranchers and other locals from as far as one hundred miles make the journey on winding gravel roads to small towns like Poker Jim Butte to participate in a rare opportunity for live theatre. Actors are housed and fed by members of the community, who regard the troupe's arrival as an opportunity for culture and fun.

Attendance at the theatre is demanding, but it is also rewarding. As audience members, you have the power to choose your focus, engage emotionally and intellectually, express your response, and have your presence felt and acknowledged by the artist. These are part of the special thrill of being in a theatre audience. Some theatre pieces affect you deeply and cause you to undergo a transformation that may affect your life. Opening yourself to new theatrical experiences and what they proffer is the true challenge and pleasure of being a member of a theatre audience.

be six, eight, or twelve hours long. German director Peter Stein's (b. 1937) 2000 production of Goethe's *Faust* took on the whole work, rarely performed in its entirety, for a twenty-hour event. The audience faced more than the challenge of length. The space was divided into two playing areas. For each scene, the audience was shuffled back and forth between the two spaces, which were reconfigured every twenty to sixty minutes. The seating arrangement changed several times and the audience was even expected to stand for a particular portion (see Photo 2.7). Navigating the performance became one of the demands placed on the audience.

The six-hour *Rwanda 94* (1999), created by the Belgian company Groupov along with artists from Rwanda, also challenged its audience with more than length, by addressing the horrors of the Tutsi genocide and Hutu massacre that took place in Rwanda in 1994. Video images of dead bodies hacked by machetes and an account of events by a woman whose children and husband were murdered were all part of the piece. Audiences were challenged to deal with these emotional presentations as they learned more about the causes of the violence, including the role played by European and American powers.

Sometimes the journey to a production becomes a challenge in and of itself. The Théâtre du Soleil's location in the woods of Vincennes requires a trip to the last stop on the Paris metro and transportation from there to the theatre on a special theatre shuttle bus. Arriving at night, through the woods, to the theatre's courtyard, illuminated with



## KEY IDEAS

- The audience's presence is vital to the theatrical experience. The immediate interaction between actor and audience is one of the special thrills of live performance.
- The presence and participation of the audience reflects the theatre's communal roots in ritual. When you join the audience, you become part of a unique, temporary community.
- Audience members also respond to the theatre as individuals influenced by their own personal histories. Ethnicity, religion, race, class, or gender can divide or unite an audience.
- Unlike film audiences, theatre audiences choose their focus.
- Conventions of audience response and participation vary from place to place, throughout history, and even from one production to another. These conventions may be inherited through tradition or set up by a production.
- Aesthetic distance is the ability to observe a work of art with a degree of detachment and objectivity. Artists manipulate aesthetic distance for their own ends.
- Political theatre places special demands on its audience, challenging and confronting their beliefs to spur them to real action.
- Over time conventions evolve and radical new relationships between the audience and performers can become traditional arrangements.
- Theatre can challenge its audience physically, emotionally, and intellectually.
- Opening ourselves to new theatrical experiences and what they proffer is the true challenge and pleasure of being a member of a theatre audience.