Part Three

Special Topics

7   Genre

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Western culture is obsessed with definitions. People wear T-shirts with slogans and put stickers on their cars to help others define their personalities. Ads explain that new television shows are "wacky comedies" or "exciting dramas." Political candidates distill their ideas and policies down to short, easily digested catchphrases. We list our favorite musicians and athletes on our Facebook pages to help people understand who we are. The cultural need to define seems limitless. Of course, this desire appears in the arts as well. But since creative work is generally subjective and often difficult to describe, defining it can be problematic. Anybody who has ever read a music review that describes a song as "a cross between zydeco and electronica with polka and hip-hop influences" understands this dilemma.

So how do you define something like theatre—especially since a theatrical script is meant to be reinterpreted? We can easily call *Macbeth* a tragedy—but what if we do a production using puppetry? And add music? And change the characters from tenth-century Scottish royalty to professional wrestlers (all of which has been done)? Is it still Shakespeare's infamous "Scottish play," or have we invented a new type of theatre: sports entertainment/puppet theatre/musical/tragedy? Frustratingly, both are correct. The point here is that defining theatre is a tricky business. Theatre artists love to break rules and make audiences think about scripts from new, unexpected perspectives.

In an effort to simplify, this chapter employs two approaches to define a production through generic criticism. The first is by the content of the production's script. The genre is defined by specific actions taking place in

the script—if funny things happen, it is a comedy. If tragic things happen, it is a tragedy. However, a production can also be defined by being identified with a specific aesthetic or cultural movement, such as realism or feminism. When it is more appropriate to discuss a genre from its cultural context and not the script itself, we will discuss it from this perspective.

Also, just to complicate this approach even further, a production is rarely just one genre. For example, a production of a broad, Shakespearean comedy or a big, spectacular Broadway musical may both feature elements of realism despite the fact that neither is entirely realistic. Conversely, a realistic script can also contain elements of low comedy and feminist theatre.

Finally, in no way is the list of genres presented here exhaustive. There are many more types of theatre, defined both by the script's action and by the cultural movement with which it is affiliated. The purpose of the following is to provide you with the tools to define theatrical productions in specific ways. Does this seem subjective? It is. But when you are dealing with a topic as fluid as theatrical performance, subjectivity always comes into play.

Classical and Historical Definitions

Genre is a French word that comes from the Latin *generis*, meaning "kind." It is similar to *genus*, a term used in biology to classify living organisms and fossils. The Greek philosopher Aristotle was the first to classify living things based on their similarities in his work *The History of Animals* (c. 350 BCE). Interestingly, he used this same strategy in *The Poetics* (c. 335–323 BCE), a later work about poetry, drama, and literature. In it, he had much to say about the mechanics and functions of drama. He also provided definitions of ancient Greece's two most prevalent forms of drama—tragedy and comedy.

Historians generally believe that **tragedy** was the most common type of theatre in classical Greece. Of all the full scripts from this era that we have, the overwhelming majority of them are tragedies, and this type of drama played a specific role in Greek democracy. Aristotle defined it as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also as having magnitude, complete in itself." In other words, it is a play featuring specific actions that are sad (or serious) involving characters who were important or well-known ("having magnitude").

The final part is important, as Aristotle believed that in order for a play to be truly tragic, it had to feature a character who, while important and heroic, also possessed a "tragic flaw." This mistake in judgment because of a lack of knowledge ultimately leads to their downfall and upsets the balance of the universe. Aristotle's belief was that the purpose of tragedy was to instill "pity and fear" in audiences, and it would eventually create a feeling of catharsis or emotional purgation that audiences would find pleasurable. Aristotle greatly admired the play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, considering it the "perfect tragedy," which is not surprising as it fits his definition.

"Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be."

William Hazlitt, essayist

According to Aristotle, **comedy** is "an imitation of characters of a lower type [and features] some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive." While tragedy focuses on earth-shattering actions performed by important people, comedy is about common people with common problems. There are numerous subsections of comedies—generally based on the style of humor or type of plot. **Farce** is a type of comedy that has absurdly complicated plots, broad characters who behave irrationally, and lots of physical comedy. Examples include the appropriately titled *Bedroom Farce* by Alan Ayckbourn, Michael Frayn's *Noises Off,* and the Stephen Sondheim musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.* **Romantic comedy** is defined by its plot. This genre generally features two sympathetic characters who, because of a series of extenuating circumstances, cannot be together. Fortunately, the two overcome their obstacles and get to enjoy a happy ending. A. R. Gurney's *Sylvia* and Neil Simon's *Same Time Next Year* are examples of romantic comedy.

Of course, tragedy and comedy are not mutually exclusive; some scripts feature elements of both. Those scripts are called **black comedy**. Sometimes, like *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee, they are comic scripts with a serious ending—other times, like *Rhinoceros* by Eugène Ionesco or Noah Haidle's *Mr. Marmalade*, they are serious plays with happy endings. The hallmark of a black comedy is that it generally deals with dark

The 2009 production of Michael Frayn's farce *Noises Off*, Novello Theatre, London (directed by Lindsay Posner). Photo © Robbie Jack/Corbis.

characters and subjects that one would not generally consider funny. For example, Martin McDonagh's *A Behanding in Spokane* is about Carmichael, a man who has spent years traveling the United States in search of his severed hand. During the play, he encounters a pair of drug dealers who offer to sell him a hand they have stolen from a local museum. When Carmichael learns it is not his hand, he chains them to a radiator and threatens to light them on fire. This is not typical comic fare, but playwright McDonagh finds humor in the terror and absurdity of the situation.

Two other comic genres that are closely related are **high** and **low comedy**. Comic wordplay, humor based on mistaken identities and false assumptions, and characters who flout the conventions of an exceedingly mannered society are all elements of high comedy. Generally, the conflict and humor in high comedy comes from watching "upper-crust" characters try to satisfy their base desires (lust, greed and any other deadly sin you can think of . . .) while struggling to maintain their aristocratic standing. For example, in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack and Algernon, two wealthy Englishmen, invent a secret identity (the titular "Ernest") to woo women. The comedy happens when

The 2013 production of *A Behanding in Spokane*, Keegan Theatre (featuring Manu Kumasi, Mark A. Rhea, and Laura Herren; directed by Colin Smith). Photo by C. Stanley Photography.

the women begin to realize the charade and the men are forced to go to great lengths to keep from being found out. Many plays by the French playwright Molière (1622–1673), such as *The Miser* and *Tartuffe*, also exemplify high comedy.

While high comedy focuses on characters who attempt to follow society's rules, characters in low comedy set out to deliberately disrupt social norms. The humor in these plays comes from watching culturally accepted rules and behaviors disrupted by slapstick violence, exaggerated sexuality, and absurd and scatological behavior. The earliest examples of low comedy in Western theatre are the satyr plays from fifth-century-BCE Greece that were bawdy retellings of well-known stories and myths. This tradition of broadly comic stories performed for popular audiences was also present in *commedia dell'arte*, which began in Italy in the sixteenth century. With roots in satyr plays and comic Roman theatre, commedia dell'arte featured broad stock characters, improvised jokes and stories, and a great deal of physical comedy. There are also elements of low comedy in Shakespeare (such as Sir Toby Belch's misadventures in *Twelfth Night*) and the puppet theatre tradition of Punch and Judy. More recently, plays like *The Nerd* by Larry Shue and *One Man, Two Guvnors*

Oliver Goldsmith's play *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) is an example of high comedy, also called comedy of manners. It exists in a world of aristocratic, mannered society where wit and gamesmanship in matters of love has high value. (2012 production, University of Florida, featuring Cristian Gonzales and Michelle Bellaver; directed by Judith Williams). Photo by Shari Thompson.

by Richard Bean (and adapted from the eighteenth-century play *Servant of Two Masters* by Carlo Goldoni) feature socially awkward protagonists who upset the status quo.

One of the most influential Western genres was **melodrama**. With their roots in the popular English theatre of the nineteenth century, melodramas were formulaic performances that emphasized plot and action over any character development. In fact, one of the hallmarks of melodrama was simply drawn, one-dimensional characters. These characters were defined by their moral alignment—good characters were entirely good and evil characters were entirely evil. But this moral rigidity allowed a clarity of action that appealed to popular audiences. For example, the villain never had to waste time explaining his actions—he was doing them simply because he was evil. This lack of character development allowed simple plots that focused on action with little time for discussion, as well as happy endings where good triumphed over evil. The popularity of melodrama lay in its adherence to a formula that was simple to follow, was pleasurable to watch, and provided a satisfying, morally redemptive climax.

The 2013 production of Carlo Goldoni's *A Servant to Two Masters*. Goldoni utilized familiar stock characters in commedia dell'arte such as wily servants and hapless merchants but did away with the half masks worn by commedia performers. Produced by the University of Florida School of Theatre and Dance (featuring Joseph Urick, Rob Cope, and Anastasia Placido; directed by Judith Williams; costumes by Robin McGee). Photo by Robin McGee.
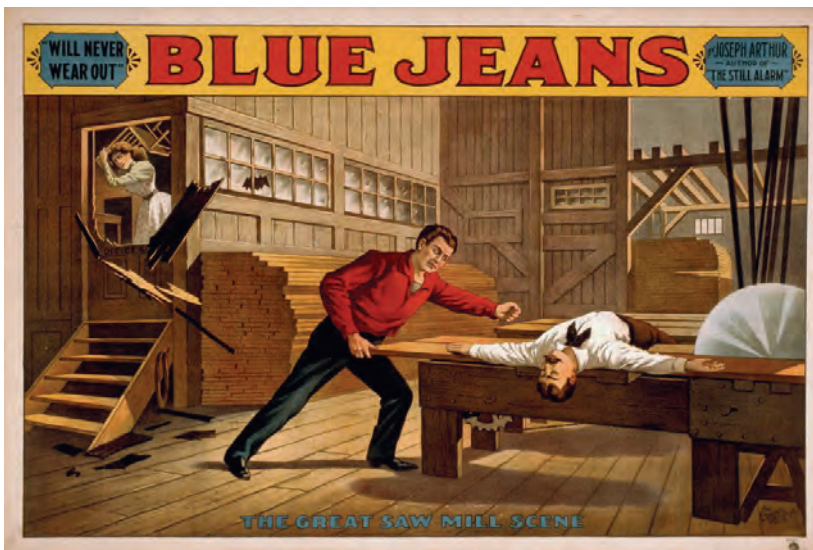
Poster for the popular 1890 melodrama *Blue Jeans*. In a sawmill, the villain ties the hero to a board, where an approaching buzz saw promises certain death. Suddenly his girlfriend, previously locked in the office, breaks free and rescues him. A later silent film ensured that this moment would become a long-standing plot cliché.

While melodrama has fallen out of favor as a theatrical genre, its impact on film and television is undeniable. Many action movies and TV procedurals follow a formulaic plot and feature simplistic, morally absolute characters. While their stories may not be complex, their appeal lies in watching characters—either good or evil—take action and eventually get what they deserve.

The Rise of "Isms"

Theatre always reflects the values and ideas of the culture that produces it. Informed audience members can usually guess when and where a script was written by looking for a few telling cultural clues. With that in mind, the genres discussed next are inextricably linked to a specific cultural or aesthetic movement. Sometimes they are a product of a new cultural ideas or a reaction to an artistic idea, but they are always linked to what is going on in the world around them.

The most prevalent and well known of these "isms" in Western theatre is **realism**. The roots of realism are found in the cultural and technological shifts of the nineteenth century. Scientists and political figures such as Auguste Comte, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin looked at the world objectively and based theories and ideas on empirical evidence as opposed to ephemeral beliefs based in mythology or spirituality. This shift toward the empirical created a theatre of realism that was used as an objective laboratory to observe human behavior.

The theatre artists of the time responded to this movement by creating work with a high degree of verisimilitude featuring detailed, authentic-looking designs; characters who behaved in a logical fashion; and stories dealing with issues and actions similar to those faced by most people. Shakespeare's playfulness and poetry and the classical values espoused by Sophocles were replaced by plays about poverty, social inequity, and dysfunctional families—a move that outraged some audiences and critics. However, the shift toward a more realistic theatre that portrayed life objectively was unstoppable.

Two of the most influential practitioners of realism are playwright Anton Chekhov and acting teacher/director Konstantine Stanislavsky, who adapted and modified many of the ideas of realism with their company the Moscow Art Theatre. Chekhov wrote scripts like *The Cherry Orchard*
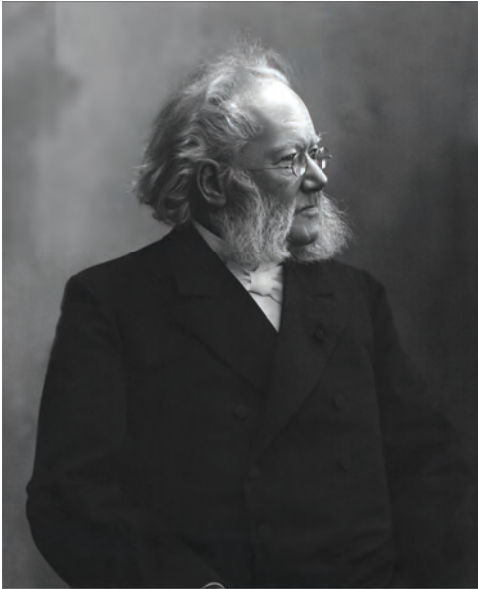
Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen is considered one of the most important dramatists of all time. His controversial play *A Doll's House* (1879), the story of a woman who realizes she has been living her life as a plaything, spearheaded an international move toward dramatic realism. Photo by Gustav Borgen. Courtesy of the Digitalt Museum.

The 2006 production of *A Doll's House*, University of Minnesota (directed by Steve Cardamone). Photo by Michal Daniel.

and *Uncle Vanya* for the MAT that depicted the trials and tribulations of the Russian landowning class while Stanislavsky created The System, a method of training that encouraged actors to create characters that behaved in a true-to-life, convincing manner. The style and training practiced by the MAT has informed nearly every major theatre artist of the last century. Realism has infused nearly every aspect of theatrical practice—some scripts that exemplify this movement are *'night, Mother* by Marsha Norman, *Glengarry Glen Ross* by David Mamet, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* by Jane Chambers, and the *Shape of Things* by Neil LaBute.

Naturalism

Despite its rapid rise to ubiquity, there was still some resistance to realism. William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), the Irish poet who also wrote elegiac, abstract plays, believed that realism was too limiting and that it removed the "joyful, fantastic, extravagant, whimsical, beautiful, resonant, and altogether reckless" elements that were vital to theatre. While Yeats considered realism too realistic, some theatre artists did not think it was realistic enough. Whereas realists wanted to reflect reality on stage, naturalists wanted to do away with all the theatrical trappings and actually place reality on stage. Naturalists rejected traditional plots and characters to create work that unfolded over real time and consciously avoided dramatic action and climactic moments. For example, there was no traditional intermission in August Strindberg's naturalist script *Miss Julie*. In its place was a folk dance performed by local peasant characters to occupy the time while the main characters were off stage.

One of the most outspoken advocates of naturalism was Andre Antoine (1858–1943), the primary director of Théâtre Libre (or "Free Theatre") in Paris. Antoine produced scripts featuring colloquial dialogue; plots that unfolded in an unhurried, organic manner; and settings that were extremely authentic and detailed—in an 1888 production of *The Butchers*, he hung actual sides of beef onstage. These practices went against the conservative idea of theatre that existed in France at the time. However, as the Théâtre Libre audience was made up of subscribers, it was able to circumvent restrictive government policies. Antoine was with Théâtre Libre for less than a decade, but in that time he produced Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Leo Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness*

Photo White   THE RESTAURANT SCENE IN "THE GOVERNOR'S LADY" AT THE REPUBLIC
A Belasco production is nothing if not realistic in every detail. All of the fixtures, the tables, chairs, coffee boilers, dishes used in the restaurant scene in the new play were obtained from Childs' Restaurant Equipment Company and were installed by employees of that firm exactly as if a new restaurant were being opened on the stage

Photo from David Belasco's 1912 production of *The Governor's Lady*. Source: *Theatre Magazine*, vol. 25, no. 140 (October 1912), p. 104.

in a manner that featured the heightened reality and verisimilitude of naturalism.

Another advocate of naturalism was American producer and playwright David Belasco (1854–1931), who pioneered the use of technology to bring greater realism to the stage. During a production of *Madame Butterfly*, he designed a twelve-minute sequence illustrating a sunset using stage lights colored with gelatin slides. Belasco's most famous attempt at naturalism came about during a 1912 production of *The Governor's Lady* featuring a scene in a Childs Diner, an early American chain restaurant. Not content to simply replicate the restaurant, Belasco bought the actual furniture and fixtures and set up a working diner stocked with food from the Childs chain prior to each night's performance.

Anti-Realism and Absurdism

While the naturalists reacted by trying to be more real than realism, plenty of theatre artists reacted by moving in the opposite direction, too. Following World War I and influenced by existentialism, the French **absurdists** sought to challenge the preconceived notions of conservative European culture. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), best known as a novelist and philosopher, wrote plays featuring characters forced to reassess their

personal values when faced with extreme circumstance. For example, in *Dirty Hands*, an allegory about post–World War II Europe, characters are forced to choose between two unpleasant choices in an effort to resuscitate their failing nation.

Perhaps the best-known absurdist playwright was Samuel Beckett (1906–1989). Born in Ireland, Beckett moved to France just prior to World War II. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is arguably the most well-known example of absurdist drama. The script concerns Estragon and Vladimir, who wait for the arrival of the mythical Godot, who never appears. As they wait, the pair discuss their bleak surroundings, whether they should eat a turnip or a radish, and swap hats. While this may seem ridiculous, critics have been seeking the "meaning" of the script since it was first produced in 1953. The popular consensus is that Beckett consciously rejected nearly all forms of Western character development and plot structure in an effort to portray the existential/absurdist belief that the life has no inherent meaning, but with a play as inscrutable as *Godot*, it is impossible to reach a conclusive interpretation. And that may be Beckett's point.

Perhaps the most radical reaction to realism was **theatre of cruelty**, a term devised by Antonin Artaud (1896–1948), a French actor, playwright, and theorist. In his book *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud called for a shift away from realistic, text-based theatre to create "spectacles" that were primal and poetic that used a "unique language half-way between gesture and thought" to assault the senses of the audience. Artaud also wanted to do away with the physical separation between performers and audiences, arguing that a "spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it."

While Artaud's theories were compelling—and his work influenced major theatre artists such as director Peter Brook and playwrights Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet (as well as rock musicians Patti Smith and Jim Morrison) the scripts he wrote to illustrate his theories were difficult to stage. For example, his script *The Spurt of Blood* contains the following stage direction:

> . . . two Stars are seen colliding and from them fall a series of legs of living flesh with feet, hands, scalps, masks, colonnades, porticos, temples, alembics, falling more and more slowly, as if falling in a vacuum: then

three scorpions one after another and finally a frog and a beetle which
come to rest with desperate slowness, nauseating slowness.

While this is certainly a rejection of realism, it is difficult to see how
this could be staged in a practical, theatrical style. Nevertheless, Artaud's
rejection of the dominant aesthetic style and call for a more visceral,
spectacular theatre made him one of the most influential theoreticians
of the twentieth century.

Feminist Theatre

Another group of artists rejected realism but wanted to do it in a way
that was engaging and accessible while maintaining a critical and
(sometimes) satirical edge. With its roots in the civil rights and women's
liberation movements of the 1960s, **feminist theatre** addressed the under-
representation of women in the American theatre. Feminist critics and
artists argued that traditional theatre practice—specifically that which
was derived from Aristotle's ideas—focused on stories, characters, and
linear plot structures that were customarily considered "masculine" and
failed to provide an arena for women's voices. Playwrights like María
Irene Fornés, Paula Vogel, and Wendy Wasserstein wrote scripts that ad-
dressed the issues confronted by women on a daily basis. Some of the
scripts, like Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*, employed traditional dra-
maturgy (i.e., a linear plotline, individual protagonist, and realistic char-
acters) to tell the story of a woman's personal and political growth over a
twenty-year period. Others, like Fornés's *Fefu and Her Friends*, which was
influenced by the women's collective theatre movement of the 1970s,
deal with a community of women's treatment within a patriarchal society
using a nonlinear narrative structure.

   Another important element of feminist theatre is how it deals with
mimesis or imitation. While Aristotle said that theatre (tragedy specifi-
cally) should be an "imitation of an action," feminist critics believed that
mimesis was limiting and oppressive, arguing that theatre and perfor-
mance should be more abstract to fully illustrate the female experience.
An example of this style of theatre is Holly Hughes's *The Well of Horni-
ness*, which uses the style of a 1940s radio drama for a campy, comic, and
decidedly nonrealistic exploration of female sexuality.

A vital element of feminist theatre is directly addressing gender inequities in a direct manner. One example is The Guerrilla Girls, artists and activists whose performances address issues of sexism in theatre and the visual arts. And they do it while wearing gorilla masks.

A famous quote states that "writing about music is like dancing about architecture." While that may seem like an absurd statement at first, it succinctly frames the issue that defining and criticizing art is a subjective undertaking. Combine this problem with the inherent fact that theatre is all about reinterpretation, and you have a daunting proposition. Generic criticism is an art, not a science. It is fluid and based on numerous variables, such as style, script, and the intent of the artists that produce it. Even so, understanding genres and how they function helps us understand both scripts and productions from multiple perspectives.

Sidebar: Shakespeare—One Genre Cannot Contain Him

It is rare for the work of an individual artist to be considered a genre unto itself. However, one playwright is so important and influential, his work covers three distinct genres all his own. Of course, we are talking about William Shakespeare. His scripts can generally be broken down into three genres, but as discussed elsewhere, it is never that simple.

The first Shakespearean genre is tragedy. In Shakespeare's case, tragedy means a serious play with an unhappy ending featuring a protagonist who suffers exceptional calamity and loss. Usually there's a single protagonist (*Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus*), but occasionally the calamities happen to two people (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*). The trademark of Shakespearean tragedy is a stage littered with dead bodies at the play's end.

Shakespeare's histories generally deal with the War of the Roses, a fifteenth-century English civil war. These scripts provide fictionalized accounts of the exploits of actual historical figures (*Richard III*, *Henry V*) and deal with the English sense of destiny and identity. Some scholars talk about the crossover between the tragedies and histories—for example, *Julius Caesar* is generally considered a tragedy, but it is about an actual historic figure.

Finally—and most convolutedly—Shakespeare wrote three types of comedies—farcical comedies, romantic comedies, and (most strangely) serious comedies. Shakespeare's farcical comedies are the most recognizable to twenty-first-century audiences as comedy. Scripts like *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Comedy of Errors* use slapstick humor and are usually based on mistaken identity. Despite the name, Shakespeare's romantic comedies have little to do with Jennifer Aniston's latest movie. These scripts, like *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are set in unrealistic worlds and feature characters with supernatural powers.

Despite its seemingly oxymoronic name, the last type of Shakespeare's scripts is the serious comedy. This type is a sort of catch-all for the plays that do not fit any of the other definitions. For instance, they are serious, but unlike the tragedies, end happily. Some examples of serious comedies are *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*.

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