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The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance tells the story of the drama through its many changes in style and convention from medieval times to the present day. With a wide sweep of coverage, John Styan analyses the key features of staging, including early street theatre and public performance, the evolution of the playhouse and the private space, and the pairing of theory and stagecraft in the works of modern dramatists. He focuses on the *conventions* by which a playwright, his actors and their audience create the phenomenon of theatre and the way such conventions have changed over time.

Styan is among a small number of influential scholars who have developed performance criticism and theatre history from their origins in literary studies into an independent and respected field. From the vantage point of a lifetime's study he examines and illustrates the multitude of factors which have brought and continue to bring plays to life.

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The English Stage

A history of drama and performance

J. L. Styan

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Preface

The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance traces a persistent institution through its many changes in style and convention, focusing chiefly on issues of performance as seen in particular plays.

The secret of many an interesting play – and of the special event its production represents – is lost in the past, and must remain so, because in one sense no play really survives its own day, its performance being dead as soon as it ends. Yet in another sense, each new performance, each revival, ensures that something of the original life of the play is still alive. Recreation of that life is the concern of drama study, and certainly of an historical survey. It is a matter of focus, of seeing where the text carries within itself signs of the original event. The dedicated student of drama is in the business of theatrical birth and rebirth.

To seek to recover the circumstances of staging a play is also to insist upon looking for its vitality. A play lives in its ability to create something of an electric circuit between the actor and his audience, and this interchange also reflects the relationship of the theatre and society, between the implicit role of the stage and the community that nourishes it. It follows as the night the day that the merits of a play may not be fully understood without a sense of how it worked, or failed to work, when it was played under the conditions for which it was written.

The present inquiry therefore aims to pay more than lip-service to the notion of drama as performance, and to make more than a gesture towards the idea of theatre as a composite art, one that mixes music and mime, dance and song, painting and design, poetry and narrative, and much else. It is pre-

cation and response, and seeks out evidence of the manipulation of the audience and its powers of perception. A play acquires life according to the nature and possibilities of its staging methods, but always together with the innumerable conventions and devices, extrinsic and intrinsic, that make up its elements. What passes between actor and spectator on the occasion of a performance is a compound of a multitude of forces – mostly traditions and expectations, but also the anticipated contributions and innovations of the playwright, the actors and other theatre artists.

In the mode of stagecraft at work in any play or period, four insistent principles belonging to the art of drama claim special attention:

- (1) *The audience's role* in the creative act of theatre is an indispensable factor in the equation that makes drama possible.
- (2) *The physical medium* of performance – the acting area, its shape and space, the stage structure, the playhouse and its size – affects the kind of acting and the response to it.
- (3) The style of *the actors' performance* absolutely determines the success or failure of the work as a whole, and whether its purpose has been fulfilled and its point and purpose perceived.
- (4) *The written play* is subject to the pressures of past ways and means, the tyrannical expectations of the audience, and the strengths and weaknesses of the human factor in the artistic undertaking.

In short, all drama is subject to a body of aesthetic laws for performance and communication. These are generally brought unquestioned to a theatrical event as part of the common baggage of all parties to the play – author, actor and audience – and imply their general consent if the business of the theatre and the play is to go forward. Each contributor is associated with certain kinds of conventions, and the following condensed list may be helpful as a guide to the spectrum of conventional possibilities:

- (1) *The author's rules*, governing:
 - the play's form and style, and its musical content.

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- the play's genre: comedy, tragedy, etc.; masque, mime, etc.
- the degree of reality implied: natural, symbolic/poetic or ritualistic.
- the play's plot and structure.
- the forms of language, devices of speech and dialogue.
- (2) *The actor's signals*, transmitted in performance through:
 - his mode of performance: naturalistic, representational, etc.
 - movement, gesture, facial expression (for characterization).
 - manner and tone of speech: realistic, ritualistic.
 - costume, mask, make-up; props, décor, setting, lighting.
 - a physical acting area or playhouse, his spatial workplace (arena, thrust or proscenium stage).
- (3) *The audience's expectations*, born of:
 - its place and time.
 - its cultural experience and assumptions.
 - its political, religious, economic persuasions.
 - its kind and degree of imaginative perception.

In a recent Hamlyn lecture Richard Eyre, Director of the Royal National Theatre, summarized the function of convention by asserting that the theatre 'thrives on metaphor; things stand *for* things rather than being the thing itself, a room can become a world, a group of characters a whole society' (4 July 1991). Decoding a text that is for the most part encoded unconsciously and passively is the obvious task of the actor, and it is also the implied duty of the student of drama.

The book, finally, is indebted to a variety of artists as well as scholars: it is a mistake to ignore the practical discoveries made by actors, directors and designers. The important mixture of interests these silent contributors represent makes a last point: living theatre has always been nourished by disparate voices, and where an advance in the study and practice of drama has been evident in the last few years, it has often been a consequence of the coming together of the artist and the scholar in a joint enterprise. It would be pleasing if the present undertaking were to make a contribution of this kind.

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