

Introduction: theatre and theatre studies

The term 'theatre' has its origins in the Greek word *theatron*, meaning a 'place for looking'. Thus, originally, theatre referred to both a place as well as to a particular form of sense perception. Today, the concept of 'theatre' can refer to: (1) a building; (2) an activity ('going to' or 'doing' theatre); (3) an institution; and, (4) more narrowly, an art form. In the past, theatre was often used as a synonym for drama, a usage that can be still be found in the names of some university departments. The terminological complexity of the term means that the object of theatre studies is multi-dimensional and composed of many different fields of enquiry and scholarly perspectives. These areas of study can be grouped under the following broad categories:

- historical
- aesthetic/theoretical
- social/cultural.

If we examine our four definitions, we can see they correspond to these categories in one or more ways. Theatre buildings are, for example, of historical interest, the extant Greek theatres being over 2,000 years old. Those of particular architectural significance may also be of aesthetic interest, and, depending on where they are located, theatre buildings occupy a variety of social and cultural functions ranging from high-class political and economic representation to covert demonstrations of counter-cultural resistance. As an activity for the spectators, theatre-going may encompass a similar mix of social and aesthetic processes ranging from conspicuous consumption (the box at the opera) to semi-religious observance. Most makers of theatre (actors, directors, designers, writers) regard their craft primarily as an aesthetic activity, although its highly collaborative nature might even be of interest to a sociologist or anthropologist. This self-image has of course changed over time: the job of the director scarcely existed before 1900 as a separate artistic function; and before 1750 acting was seldom, if ever, regarded as an art form.

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Theatre as an activity is probably the most complex aspect of the medium, and certainly the dimension that has given rise to the greatest degree of theoretical commentary. Theatre does not require specialized buildings, but they are certainly the norm. As we shall see later in Chap. 2, it does demand the imaginative collusion of spectators and performers to function. In the 1960s, the theatre critic and translator Eric Bentley described this collusion by means of a famous formula: ‘A impersonates B while C looks on’ (1965: 150). This bedrock equation is predicated on the assumption that the performer’s activity is essentially role-playing (impersonation), pretending to be another person. The spectator’s activity is the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ and acceptance of the make-believe. As we shall see in the course of this book, theatre can no longer be reduced to this basic activity, although it certainly holds true for most of its historical manifestations. What is important is the description of the basic aesthetic activity involved in theatre – the active role played by the spectator to make the theatrical experience happen.

These examples should suffice to demonstrate the highly complex nature of theatre and its potential to be studied from a variety of perspectives. It can be an object of study for social and cultural historians, for psychologists and sociologists as well as for students of architecture and town-planning. Before the advent of a specialized discipline, however, the bulk of theatre research was undertaken by literary historians concerned with the ‘golden ages’ of European drama and dramatists such as classical Greece, Shakespeare, Molière or Weimar classicism. This is especially true of classical philology and Shakespeare studies, which boast over 150 years of intense research into all aspects of the stage surrounding the dramatic texts. In light of such competition, it was not always easy for theatre studies to assert its claim to legitimacy as an independent discipline. Such disciplinary demarcation disputes and territorial squabbles were part and parcel of the emergence of theatre studies as an autonomous academic discipline in most countries, as we shall see below. At the same time, the discipline retains strong historical interests and has in turn influenced different branches of literary studies. A great amount of work has been carried out in the past two decades on the history of performance reception, for example. In the field of Greek drama, the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk) should be noted, both in terms of its book publications and its online searchable database. Performance reception is strongly represented in Shakespeare studies (the Cambridge ‘Shakespeare in Production’ series) and more generally in Cambridge University Press’s ‘Plays in Production’ series.

Today, the fields of enquiry are manifold and continually changing. There are, of course, considerable national differences as well. *Theaterwissenschaft* in

Germany, which has one of the oldest traditions of independent research, is still more theoretically orientated and suspicious of practical work than courses in the UK or the USA. The important point is, however, that a subject which began in most countries as a discipline devoted to historical research and the study of dramatic texts appears to have left this legacy largely behind. Today, theatre studies has a strong focus on *live performance*, in all its artistic, cultural and generic variety.

Integrated theatre studies

While theatre studies has until recently focused attention on dramatic texts and their productions (both past and present), this isolation of one aspect or genre of the theatrical medium is increasingly coming under scrutiny and criticism.

The European theatre tradition is characterized by a high degree of specialization, which has seen the development of specific and highly autonomous theatre forms. Since the Renaissance, we can observe the evolution and institutionalization of dramatic, music, dance and puppet theatre. The distinction between these four genres or forms is based on the activity of the central performer, who predominantly speaks, sings, dances or mimes, or is non-human. It is erroneous to assume that these theatre forms have always existed in splendid isolation. Dramatic theatre without musical accompaniment, for example, was only introduced in the late nineteenth century. There are countless historical genres that mixed, in various combinations, speech, song and dance. Forms such as the *opéra comique*, the operetta and the musical employ the acting and dancing singer. The strict licensing of dramatic theatres in the eighteenth century (only a few theatres in Paris and London were permitted to perform 'straight plays') encouraged mixed genres such as pantomimes and melodramas, which emphasized singing, dancing, mime and even occasionally puppetry. Most forms of classical Asian theatre make no distinction between dance, drama and musical theatre on the level of performance.

As already mentioned, the origins of theatre studies as a branch of literary criticism or history meant that scholars focused almost exclusively on dramatic theatre, and a highly selective cross-section at that. Even today, students must prepare themselves for courses of study that emphasize, almost exclusively, spoken theatre. Other forms, such as opera or dance, and very seldom puppet theatre, are, unless there are specialized departments, often marginalized. The study of opera is usually delegated to music departments with the result that research has often emphasized questions of musical style or biographical detail, neglecting opera's place in the theatre culture of a period or indeed the analysis

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of operatic performances. Needless to say, subgenres such as operetta or musicals were accorded even less attention. Dance as an area of academic research had an even more difficult task to legitimize itself. It established itself sometimes in music, sometimes in theatre departments and often in connection with dance training.

Since the middle of the 1980s, the call for an integrated approach to theatre studies has become increasingly audible. There are a number of reasons for this. An important one is the necessity to accommodate new works that transcend conventional generic boundaries. Dance works may include spoken text, operas employ pantomime, puppets 'perform' alongside actors or singers: a growing number of such works require from scholars at least a working knowledge of all major theatre genres. For this reason, the main theatre forms will be outlined below to provide a basic orientation for the later chapters, which will draw freely on these forms.

Dramatic theatre

The terms 'drama', 'dramatic theatre' and 'spoken theatre' are often used interchangeably. Although strictly speaking the term 'drama' refers to a form of literature (along with prose and poetry), it is also employed as a synonym for theatre in general, which is, however, both historically restricting and highly ethnocentric. Etymologically, the word 'drama' comes from a Greek noun *δρᾶμα*, meaning originally an action and then a play for the stage. Most European languages have adopted the Greek word in this sense, although the English usage is far more encompassing than, say, the French or German equivalents. As a field of study, 'drama' in the English-speaking world is often used as a synonym for theatre. In this book, 'dramatic theatre' will be used to encompass those forms of theatre that employ exclusively or predominantly the spoken word. The predominance of the spoken voice as a defining characteristic means that a large number of other genres could be included as well, for example:

- stand-up comedy and satirical revues
- children's and young people's theatre
- devised theatre
- improvisational theatre.

With the exception of devised theatre (which is understood here to mean pieces not based on a pre-existing dramatic text), these forms will not be dealt with in any depth for space reasons, but they are still important manifestations of dramatic theatre nonetheless. If one were to look to other media, then it would also be necessary to include radio and television drama, which certainly

constitute branches of drama but not of theatre. In recent years, the equation of theatre studies with dramatic theatre has come under criticism because of the almost exclusive focus on 'highbrow' canonized works. On the one hand, this focus reflects the practice of most subsidized and university theatres, which attempt to strike a balance between classics and new dramas. On the other, it has led to a neglect of marginalized forms, both in the past and in the present.

Music theatre

Music theatre as an area of theatre studies is marked by a curious paradox. Its dominant form, the opera, has for two centuries been the paramount manifestation of theatrical culture, commanding the most economic support and occupying central functions of political representation. Yet, until recently, it has been largely neglected by theatre studies, which accorded it at best a marginal place in its field of study. The term itself is also somewhat contested. 'Music theatre' can be employed as an overall concept encompassing all forms of theatre with a musical predominance. This would necessarily include everything from grand opera to the 'lowly' musical revue. In the English-speaking world, it would also include the musical as a specific genre of great economic importance, but which has, until recently, played only a very marginal role in the theatre cultures of continental Europe. Most research attention has been focused, not surprisingly, on the opera, a manifestation of music theatre that enjoys extremely high cultural status.

Research into opera has long been a subdiscipline of musicology. Its incorporation into theatre studies is a relatively recent phenomenon, which has grown in importance owing to the spread of interdisciplinary perspectives. A musicological approach to opera focusing primarily on the score or questions of musical style and genre tends to eschew major dimensions of the operatic experience. From a historical perspective, these would include questions of economics and political representation as well as the importance of virtuosic performance as a central component of the star system. Contemporary questions of staging and theatre design (scenography) can today often be better studied in the opera than in the dramatic theatre, as directors and designers switch between theatrical genres and, equipped with bigger budgets in the former, appear to experiment more freely.

The study of opera within theatre studies nevertheless poses certain problems, the most important of which is the necessity for some kind of specialized musical knowledge. Whereas comprehension of spoken language is more or less innate, musical competence is not. It requires special training and acquaintance with a multitude of conventions that can only be acquired over time. This

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requirement was clearly a hindrance to including music theatre, and especially opera, within the purview of theatre studies. It was not until the 1970s that musicology and theatre studies began to focus on the same research questions. They included questions on:

- stage technology
- history of staging
- the working methods of composers, librettists and ballet masters
- history of reception
- history of operatic subjects
- the economic conditions of opera production over the past centuries.

These are, of course, questions that have been the staple fare of theatre historians for the past century. We would need to add to the list, somewhat later, the field of performance analysis. These are also questions that do not require, in the first instance, specialized musical knowledge. On this level, co-operation is indeed possible, and an increasing number of publications are documenting such new perspectives, as we shall see in Chap. 9.

There are a number of good reasons for including music theatre in an integrative theatre studies:

- Performative dimension: works of music and dramatic theatre are made manifest by a performer; they are transitory and rely on dramaturgy and staging to achieve completion. In a narrower sense, we can say that the human voice is another common factor: the singing voice on the one hand, the speaking voice on the other.
- Historical dimension: in certain periods, music theatre is the dominant aesthetic and cultural medium. Any examination of nineteenth-century 'theatre' history in any number of countries – including Germany, Italy and France – is distorted if forms of music theatre are not given appropriate attention. The beginnings of modern directorial theatre and design are also inextricably linked with opera.
- Individual artists: many leading directors and designers work in both genres. In addition, no discussion of experimental theatre is complete without knowledge of the theories and works of composers like John Cage or Mauricio Kagel. A new type of composer-director is also emerging, represented by artists such as Steve Reich and Heiner Goebbels.

Dance theatre

The terms 'dance theatre' and 'theatre dance' are of recent coinage and encompass dance forms that are performed primarily in a theatrical context. The best

known of these is, of course, classical ballet, which in the twentieth century was followed by developments such as modern dance, *Ausdruckstanz*, postmodern dance and *Tanztheater* to name just a few. Technically speaking, any form of dance can be made 'theatrical' simply by performing it in front of an audience. In this book, 'dance theatre' and 'theatre dance' will be used interchangeably as overall concepts. In recent years, these terms have been extended by concepts and genres such as 'movement' or 'physical' theatre. These have arisen to designate an increasing number of groups and experiments that seem to fall between dramatic and dance theatre, but where the moving (rather than the speaking) human body is clearly the dominant mode of expression. Physical theatre could also be used to encompass older forms of primarily movement-based theatre, such as pantomime and/or mime, which have their roots in classical antiquity.

The wider field of dance as a cultural phenomenon encompasses a myriad of manifestations ranging from folk dance to ritual. The study of these forms is often delegated to other disciplines such as folklore studies, cultural anthropology or even sport, and does not strictly fall in the remit of theatre studies. In those departments where dance is studied within its own institutional framework (and is not part of another discipline), dance as cultural expression and theatre dance may well be studied together. Because of the close institutional connections between dance and music theatre – well into the nineteenth century, operas and operettas almost always included dance scenes and interludes – the study of dance theatre was often conducted as a marginalized wing of musicology. The contributions of major composers such as Tchaikovsky or Stravinsky required at least a passing acquaintance with the history and conventions of ballet. In the Anglo-American world, academic dance research emerged either as a support discipline for the training of dancers or as a field in its own right, but often under the institutional umbrella of theatre studies. Particularly in the USA, dance studies is regarded as an interdisciplinary field of research combining aesthetic as well as broader cultural perspectives.

Like music theatre, theatre dance shares many features with dramatic theatre. Hence dance theatre research also has many perspectives in common with theatre research. On the level of performance, it deals with a complex aesthetic object. Like theatre studies, it has to deal with an ephemeral art form whose 'texts' are even more intangible than those of music or dramatic theatre. Ultimately the spectator is confronted with bodies moving in space whose movements may or may not be recorded on paper (choreography) for future dancers or generations. Nevertheless, these works constituted by physical movement can be studied from historical, theoretical and aesthetic perspectives. Historically oriented dance research concerns itself with individual choreographies, periodization, major dancers and choreographies.

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Theoretical research is focused primarily on questions of analyzing the body and movement (see Chap. 10).

Puppet and mask theatre

Puppet theatre looks back on manifold traditions and artistic forms. It ranges from simple hand-held glove puppets to highly complex performances integrating objects, marionettes, masks and live performers. One can distinguish between two-dimensional figures, employed mainly in shadow theatre, and three-dimensional, plastic figures used in hand, rod and string puppetry. Today, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain the traditional distinction between puppets and live theatre. Because of the historical, aesthetic and cultural significance of puppet theatre through history and across cultures, it must come into the purview of an integrated approach to theatre studies.

In Western theatre traditions, puppet theatre has always been a relatively marginalized genre, associated principally with children's entertainment. A glance at other theatrical cultures reveals a completely different status. Javanese *Wayang Kulit*, for example, a form of shadow theatre using transparent rod puppets, is the most widespread theatre form in Indonesia, whose origins go back to the eighth century AD. Equally widespread among the Turkish people is *Karagöz*, which is also a form of shadow puppetry with beginnings around the sixteenth century and which has sustained its appeal until today, where it can be found on television as well as on the stage. Of high cultural status is the Japanese *Bunraku*, which achieved great prominence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and today is considered to be one of the great classical theatre forms of Japan, together with *Nô*, *Kabuki* and *Kyôgen*.

In the European context, puppet theatre has only sporadically gained recognition as being of aesthetic value. Nevertheless, as a wider cultural phenomenon, it is ubiquitous and can be found in many historical and cultural contexts. Apart from theatrical performances of all kinds, these include commercial uses in fairground booths, religious contexts and even juridical applications such as the carrying out of punishments on effigies.

Modern puppet theatre does not emerge until around 1900, when puppets, particularly marionettes, were seized on by a number of representatives of the avantgarde as a means to reform realistic, text-based dramatic theatre. In Russia, Germany, Austria and France, artists emerged who proclaimed a new kind of puppet theatre distinct from fairground and children's entertainment. The reception of Asian theatre in this period also had a decisive influence on

many of these artists, although their aims transcended a mere imitation of exotic forms.

After 1945, puppet theatre developed rapidly in a number of directions. Perhaps the major advance was the increasing ‘visibility’ of the manipulator and finally the incorporation of live performers into productions. The major influence here was probably *bunraku*, which uses three black-clad manipulators who are supposed to be ‘invisible’. Groups such as the South African Hand-spring Puppet Company work primarily with *bunraku*-type puppets, but also include human actors (see Plate 1). Another development has seen the introduction of puppets into productions with live performers, such as in the work of Ariane Mnouchkine, Tadeusz Kantor and Robert Lepage. Although puppet theatre has only received marginal attention from mainstream theatre studies because of its association with children’s entertainment, indifference is today changing to fascination. In light of an increasing number of complex productions and theories that explore and cross the boundaries between human and puppet theatre, this marginal position can no longer be justified historically, aesthetically or culturally.

Like puppet theatre, masks and masking are deeply embedded in the history of the medium. The Greek theatre used masks, and the mask has in fact come to be a symbol of the medium, embodying as it does central metaphors such as concealment and the distinction between art (the mask) and life (the living actor). The masked *Commedia dell’arte* character has also assumed something of a synecdochal function as a representation of theatre as a whole.

Masks also draw attention to theatre’s ritual origins and are often studied in intercultural contexts. This usage can be seen as a point of comparison or even tension within the Western tradition because the status of mask-use in Western theatre is controversial. It oscillates between vehement rejection and passionate advocacy. The absence of masks from mainstream theatre is linked to the dominance of psychological drama, while their reappearance in theory and practice at the beginning of the twentieth century is motivated by dissatisfaction with precisely this tradition. Masks provide one of the foundations for Edward Gordon Craig’s ‘Theatre of the Future’ and represent for Vsevolod Meyerhold in the middle phase of his work a ‘symbol of theatre’ itself. Among leading contemporary directors there is similar dissent. On the one hand we find advocates such as Giorgio Strehler and Ariane Mnouchkine, who seek to draw on the tradition of masking in popular culture, and on the other Peter Brook’s sceptical attitude to reintroducing to ‘Western art theatre’ what he calls the ‘morbid mask’ (Brook 1988: 218), which is representative for a widespread view that Western culture has lost any kind of functional masking tradition. As theatre historian Susan Smith puts it: ‘The modern Western world is

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Plate 1. *Bunraku*-style puppets used by the Handspring Puppet Company in their production of Monteverdi's *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse* (1998). In this production, one of the manipulators is also a singer. Note the difference between costumed and black-clad manipulators.