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978-0-521-85622-5 - The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies

Christopher B. Balme

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Theatre Studies*

Providing thorough coverage of the methods and tools required in studying historical and contemporary theatre, this introduction examines the complexities of a rapidly changing and dynamic discipline. Following a cross-cultural perspective, the book surveys the ways theatre and performance are studied by looking initially at key elements such as performers, spectators and space. The central focus is on methodology, with sections covering theatre theory, historiography, and textual and performance analysis. The book covers all the main theatrical genres – drama, opera and dance – providing students with a comparative, integrated perspective. Designed to guide students through the academic dimension of the discipline, the volume emphasizes questions of methodology, research techniques and approaches, and will therefore be relevant for a wide variety of theatre studies courses. Informative textboxes provide background on key topics, and suggestions for further reading are included at the end of each chapter.

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Contents

<i>List of plates</i>	page ??
<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>List of tables</i>	??
<i>Preface</i>	??
Introduction: theatre and theatre studies	1
Integrated theatre studies	3
From theatre studies to performance studies	11
Outline	12
Part I ELEMENTS OF THEATRE	
Chapter 1 Performers and actors	17
Theory and analysis	18
Pedagogy of acting	22
Cross-cultural perspectives	28
Chapter 2 Spectators and audiences	34
Spectator response	36
Reception and response	38
Audiences	42
Chapter 3 Spaces and places	47
Theatrical space	49
Stage space	54
The place of theatre	58

Part II SUBJECTS AND METHODS**Chapter 4 Theories of theatre 1: historical paradigms** 65

Mimesis	67
Poiesis	69
Catharsis	72

Chapter 5 Theories of theatre 2: systematic and critical approaches 78

Semiotics	78
Poststructuralism and psychoanalysis	83
Phenomenology	85
Cultural materialism	87
Theatricality and performance theory	89

Chapter 6 Theatre historiography 96

Sources and reconstruction	97
Theatre iconography	102
Periodization	106
Contemporary approaches	111
Summary and outlook	116

Chapter 7 Text and performance 118

Status of the text	119
From drama to theatrical text	125
Play, production, performance	127

Chapter 8 Performance analysis 132

Notation and documentation	134
Tools of analysis	136
Goal of analysis	142
Methods and models	143

Chapter 9 Music theatre 147

Elements	147
Music dramaturgy	149

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85622-5 - The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies

Christopher B. Balme

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents* vii

Text and staging	152
Analysis: <i>La Bohème</i> and <i>Ariodante</i>	152

Chapter 10 Dance theatre 161

Elements	161
Movement analysis: notation, semiotics and ideology	163
Analysis: <i>Petrushka</i> and <i>Enter Achilles</i>	166

Part III THEATRE STUDIES BETWEEN DISCIPLINES**Chapter 11 Applied theatre** 179

Examples of applied theatre	179
Historical trajectories	183
Theoretical paradigms	188
Research methods	191
Outlook	193

Chapter 12 Theatre and media 195

Theatre as a medium	196
Theatre and other media	201
Intermediality	205

<i>Notes</i>	209
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<i>Bibliography and other resources</i>	212
---	-----

<i>Index</i>	226
--------------	-----

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85622-5 - The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies

Christopher B. Balme

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Plates

- | | |
|---|---------|
| 1. <i>Bunraku</i> -style puppets used by the Handspring Puppet Company in their production of Monteverdi's <i>Il Ritorno d'Ulisse</i> (1998). Photo: Herman Sorgeloos | page 10 |
| 2. The passions according to Charles Lebrun. Source: Private Collection | 20 |
| 3. Ryszard Ciésłak in the first version of <i>The Constant Prince</i> , Teatr Laboratorium, 13 Rzędów, Wrocław, 1965. Photo: Teatr Laboratorium | 26 |
| 4. Théâtre du Soleil, 1789 (1970). An example of environmental theatre. Photo: © Martine Franck/Magnum Photos/Agentur Focus | 51 |
| 5. View of the <i>hanamichi</i> , the 'flower way' of the <i>Kabuki</i> stage at the Kanamaru-za Theatre on the island of Shikoku. Photo: Christopher B. Balme | 52 |
| 6. Nineteenth-century playbill for the New Theatre Royal, Dunlop Street, Glasgow. Photo by permission of the Special Collections Department, Glasgow University Library | 100 |
| 7. Virtual Vaudeville Project, University of Georgia. Reconstruction of The Union Square Theatre, New York, 1895–6. Photo courtesy of David Saltz | 103 |
| 8. The artists' garret in Baz Luhrmann's production of Puccini's <i>La Bohème</i> (1993). Photo: Kiren Chang, courtesy of Opera Australia | 156 |
| 9. Ian MacNeill's set design for the opera <i>Ariodante</i> by Handel, Bavarian State Opera (2000). Photo: Wilfried Hösl | 159 |
| 10. DV8 Physical Theatre: <i>Enter Achilles</i> . Photo: Peter Jay | 172 |

Figures

- | | |
|---|---------|
| 1. Psychodynamic processes involved in creating a role (after Konstantin Stanislavsky's <i>Rabota Aktera nad Soboi</i> [The Actor's Work on Oneself] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1950): 632) | page 23 |
| 2. Forms of theatrical space (after Carlson 1987: 67) | 49 |
| 3. Structure of theatrical space (after Carlson 1987: 68) | 54 |
| 4. The triadic model of the sign (after Charles Sanders Peirce) | 79 |
| 5. Relationship between text and production | 129 |
| 6. Model of communication (after Shannon and Weaver) | 197 |
| 7. Graphical representation of the human-machine interface in Stelarc's <i>Ping Body</i> performance. Photo: Digital Aesthetics, Artspace, Sydney, 10 April 1996. Diagram: Stelarc, STELARC | 204 |

Tables

1. Brecht's comparison of cathartic (dramatic) and critical (epic) theatre	<i>page</i> 76
2. Theatrical sign systems (after Kowzan 1968)	82
3. Sources for theatre history	98
4. Periodization in European theatre historiography	108
5. Tools for performance analysis	136
6. Models of performance analysis: dramatic theatre	145
7. Models of performance analysis: music theatre	154
8. Models of performance analysis: dance theatre	166

Preface

Students embarking on the discipline of theatre studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century are confronted by a wealth of perspectives that the founders of the discipline at the beginning of the twentieth century could have scarcely imagined. They will find themselves situated in an academic discipline that is unique in a number of ways. Firstly, it links practice and theory in a manner that is still unusual within university study but which is slowly becoming a model for other subjects. Secondly, it offers a choice of perspectives and emphases ranging from the historical to the philosophical, from the purely aesthetic to the explicitly political. Thirdly, the student will find a subject that is by definition comparative and international in outlook.

The potential flipside of such variety is of course disorientation and lack of focus. Because the discipline of theatre studies has developed in so many different directions, it is often difficult to orientate oneself and situate what one is actually studying within the 'wider picture'. It is the aim of this introduction to provide an initial orientation. It is structured in such a way that will be of interest to students at different levels of study, both undergraduate and graduate. It seeks to provide information and answers to questions that may be posed at various stages of university study.

The first point to be emphasized is that this book focuses on theatre studies as an academic university discipline. It does not address issues of purely practical relevance such as acting skills, voice training, lighting technology, etc. The second point is that it will emphasize questions of methodology, research techniques and approaches, rather than provide in-depth information and facts on the subjects themselves. The reader will search in vain for a detailed discussion of Greek or political theatre, but will find information on the sort of sources theatre historians consult to create their accounts of the subject. In addition, there can be found at the end of each section numerous directions for further reading.

The book is structured so that it approximates very generally the way the subject is taught and researched at English-speaking universities. However, because all academic disciplines are in a constant state of (mostly productive) flux,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85622-5 - The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)xii *Preface*

any attempt to delineate sharply specific subject areas is ultimately doomed to failure. Shifts in accentuation and the redefinition of disciplinary focus are unavoidable and indispensable. Departments are forever changing course structures to keep up with perceived shifts in research, or simply in response to local administrative exigencies. What is attempted here is a cross-section or a set of broadly defined common denominators that will probably not mirror any departmental course structure but rather resonate in many different places.

Like any discipline, theatre studies has and is being subjected to processes of differentiation and specialization, which force university courses to find a happy medium between imparting normative, canonized knowledge on the one hand, and following the vagaries of contemporary research trends on the other. The structure of the book also tries to define basic fields of knowledge in Parts I and II, and provide perspectives on current research in Part III. Theatre studies is today no longer synonymous with the study of dramatic texts in various periods of European history, and this book tries to take account of different theatrical practices in a variety of cultural and historical contexts.

The book is divided into three parts, preceded by an introduction. In the introduction, I argue for the necessity of an *integrated* approach to theatre, meaning the incorporation of intercultural and interdisciplinary perspectives on drama, music theatre, dance, puppet theatre and performance art. Within each part, the order of the chapters is not binding. It may be useful for students to tackle the chapters on theatre theory quite early on, as a number of terms and concepts are explained that are used throughout the book. Each chapter concludes with suggestions for further reading. From the huge number of books and articles potentially available, I have focused on up-to-date English-language publications that are most probably readily available in a university or departmental library. The main body of the text contains, of course, many more references, which are listed in the bibliography. The book concludes with a list of reference works, periodicals and websites that students should find useful for pursuing more specific questions.

A book of this kind is principally indebted to the scholars of the field, past and present, whose endeavours have made theatre studies into one of the most vibrant disciplines in the humanities. On a more personal note, I would like to thank those colleagues who read the book or parts or it at different stages. Peter Boenisch (University of Kent), Martin Revermann and Stephen Johnston (both at the University of Toronto) all took the trouble to read most of the manuscript at a late stage, making many valuable comments and drawing my attention to many errors, some more egregious than others. Nicola Shaughnessy (University of Kent) also provided constructive feedback on a field not my own, for which

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85622-5 - The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies

Christopher B. Balme

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface xiii

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