

**T101**



**Theatre  
101**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



# Theatre 101

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# Learning to Appreciate Learning to Appreciate Theatre

***Teacher Note: This unit has no test. The final score for this unit will be from the Project plus the Questions as follows: Review Project = 50% + Matching Questions = 50%***

Teachers Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Theatre Introduction

Theatre is unique among all other art forms insofar as it takes place in real time. It is over as soon as it begins. You cannot hang it on your wall, or display it on a living room end table. You cannot hit the repeat button on your MP3 player and listen to it again and again... The *elements* of theatre are tangible and lasting; individual art forms themselves: music, costumes, set, or text. But the actual performance that is “theatre” only happens once, and even if you see the same performance with the same cast of people twice – it is a different experience. This is because theatre is a dynamic art form that in the moment is dependent on the energy of two specific groups of people: the performers and the audience.



Although theatre can be defined as, “what occurs when one or more people, isolated in time and/or space, present themselves to another or others,” theatre is so much more than just an audience viewing actors on a stage during a moment in time. There are many people and many elements that are involved in its creation and production. Its effects are lasting and have been intensely felt in various cultures and societies throughout history.

Theatre does take place in the moment, but it connects us with other times, places, and people. It is a reflection of the world around us and gets at the heart of the human condition.

In this unit we will broadly explore the people of the theatre, the elements of the theatre, and the relationship of the theatre to our culture and cultures around the world. As you go through the next three chapters, ask yourself how theatre has influenced your perception of life or your world view. As you learn about the basics of this art form, begin to develop an appreciation and respect for what is called “a lively art.”

***Please note: The final assignment for this unit is to view a piece of theatre and write a review as the Unit Project Review. There is no Unit Test for this Unit. As theatres’ seasons and schedules vary, please plan ahead so that you can fulfill this unit in a timely manner.***

Teacher  
Initials:

\_\_\_\_\_

### Appreciative

1. To value what I have received.
2. To gain respect for something I don't fully understand by learning more about it.

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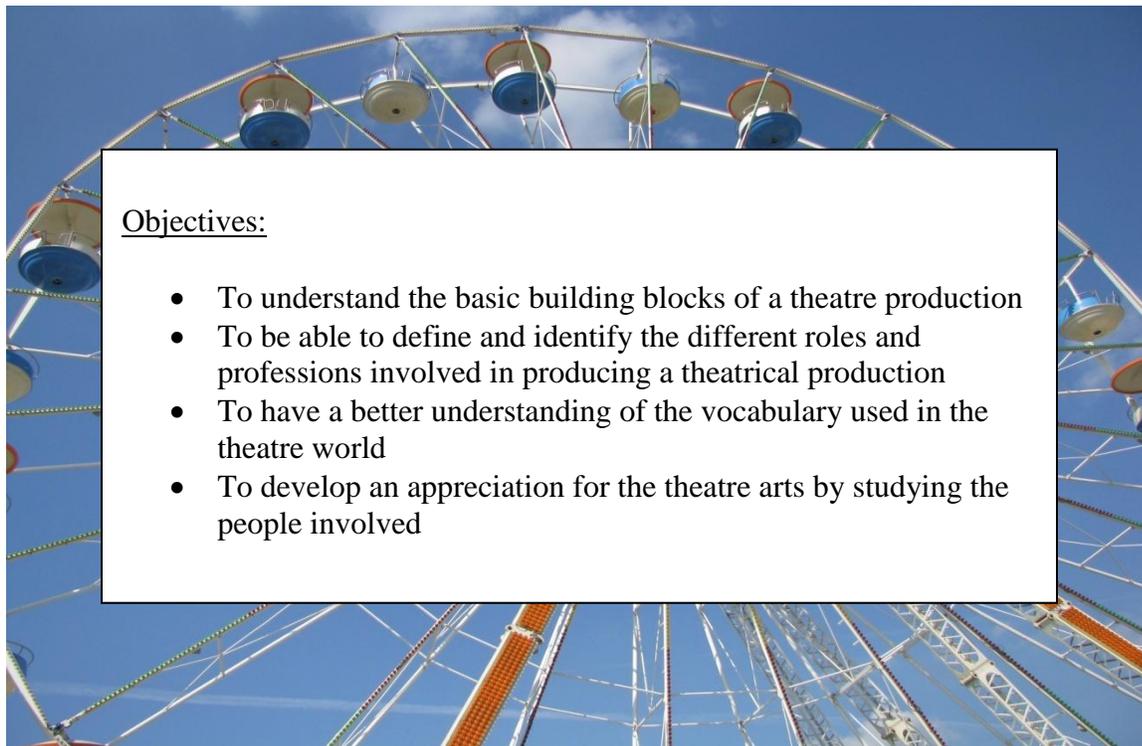
## ***Chapter 1: The People***

Theatre is a living art form. A painting is made up of various kinds of paint; a song is composed of notes and the medium of the theatre is people.

This chapter has been broken down into two sections: “On Stage & Behind the Scenes” and “Supporting Roles.” The vocabulary in this chapter is only a basic list of the people involved in producing a piece of theatre; it is by no means exhaustive. On the same token, not all plays, musicals, or shows require all of the individuals listed. In some instances, several roles are taken on by one person, or a small group of people divide the tasks amongst themselves.

### **Section 1: “On Stage & Behind the Scenes”**

There might be some vocabulary in this chapter that is new to you. Before reading this section, review the vocabulary in the box to get a better understanding of the material that we will discuss in this section.



Objectives:

- To understand the basic building blocks of a theatre production
- To be able to define and identify the different roles and professions involved in producing a theatrical production
- To have a better understanding of the vocabulary used in the theatre world
- To develop an appreciation for the theatre arts by studying the people involved

A day where there are no performances held at a theatre is called  
what?

***Vocabulary:***

**Artistic Director** – the individual with the ultimate artistic control of the theatre's production choices, directorial choices and overall artistic vision. Some of their jobs include choosing the material staged in a season, the hiring of creative/production personnel (such as directors), and other theatre management tasks.

**Playwright** – A person who creates scripts for live performances; dramatist.

**Director** - The coordinator of all artistic and technical aspects of any production. They give actors direction both in character and movement on stage.

**Stage manager** – someone who provides practical and organizational support to the director, actors, designers, stage crew and technicians throughout the production process. He or she oversees “backstage.”

**Company** – refers to all the different people involved with a particular production. Not to be confused with “theatre company,” which is more like a business that produces a season of theatrical productions.

**Backstage Crew** – work behind the scenes to assist with the smooth operation of all productions. They often help with scene and costume changes, run the light and sound boards, or assist in other ways.

**Actor** – one who acts, actress refers specifically to a female who acts, although some females prefer the term “actor.”

**Costume Designer** – the person whose responsibility it is to design costumes. They often collaborate with the makeup artist.

**Lighting Designer** – works with the director, set designer, costume designer, and sometimes the sound designer and choreographer to create an overall 'look' for the show in response to the text, while keeping in mind issues of visibility, safety, and cost.

**Makeup artist** – an artist who creates makeup and prosthetics for the production. Sometimes this includes hair and/or wig design.

**Set Designer** – someone who designs the physical surroundings in which the action will happen. The overall look of the set also gives the audience a feel for the director's vision of the production.

**Choreographer:** designs and creates the dance elements and arrangements for a show.

**Dramaturge** – a literary advisor for a theater who works with playwrights, selects and edits scripts, etc.

Although there are many different ways a play can be produced – by an individual, a group of amateur theatre artists, a school or university, or by a professional theatre company, for the sake of this chapter we will focus on the structure of a professional theatre company. The basic structure of any theatre company requires an **artistic director**, someone who oversees all of the company’s artistic choices, including the company’s season. A *season* refers to the different plays that the company will produce that year. Most seasons run from the fall of one year to the spring of the following year. See the example below of the Regina, Saskatchewan Globe Theatre’s 2008/2009 season:

## 08/09 Season...



**A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S  
DREAM**

Oct 15-Nov 1/08



**ANNE OF  
GREEN GABLES -  
a Musical**

Nov 22-Dec 28/08



**WINGFIELD'S  
INFERNO  
a solo show**

Feb 18-Mar  
7/09



**MESA**

Mar 18-Apr 4/09



**DOUBT, A PARABLE**

Apr 22-May 9/09

The artistic director may direct some of the shows in the theatre’s season, but most likely would hire **directors** to take on many of the productions. If the show is a musical, then a **music director** and **choreographer** are needed to teach the music and dances to the performers.

Some theatre companies like to produce at least one “new work” each season. A new work is just what it sounds like - a piece of theatre that has never been performed before, usually, but not necessarily, written by a local **playwright**. Some theatre companies even hold playwriting contests in order to discover new plays and playwriting talent. During such contests, the winning play or plays are often given a staged reading by professional actors. This gives the playwright, the director considering the show for performance, and artists from the community a chance to hear the play read aloud and give feedback. The playwright might then adjust certain bits of dialogue or other aspects of the piece.

A **dramaturge** is someone who acts as a “literary advisor” for a theatre company. Their duties may include researching elements of the script that are unfamiliar to the director, such as historical references or elements specific to a foreign culture.

One thing that artistic directors have to do is cater to a wide range of tastes. By selecting a season that has a variety – drama, comedy, musical, new works, and even children’s theatre, they increase their chances of selling tickets and keeping their audiences happy.

*Can you believe they tried to make a musical out of the film, "Breakfast at Tiffany's?" It's true. This big time flop never made it to Broadway. The book was written by Edward Albee, can you guess who it starred as Holly Golightly?*

In recent years, it's become very common for theatre companies to divide their season between Main Stage shows and shows that are performed on their Second Stage or in a Studio Theatre. Main Stage shows tend to be "crowd pleasers" whereas shows seen on a company's Second Stage are generally edgier or out of the ordinary. These might include touring companies, new works, or more experimental styles of theatre. Studio theatres are typically smaller, more intimate settings that afford a unique atmosphere unlike the grand spectacle the Main Stage can provide.

Plays with very small casts or even solo performance pieces are often performed in studio spaces. Likewise, a particular play or style of theatre, such as clown, where audience participation is involved might best be performed in a studio theatre due to the close proximity of the audience to the performers. When a small number of people gather in a large area, the energy of the crowd is dispersed throughout the space and consequently, the performance can sometimes feel a little "flat." In a smaller space, even a modest crowd can seem to "fill" it, creating a more dynamic experience for both audience and performers alike.

Once a play is selected and a **director** hired, the show must be cast. This means that the director needs to audition **actors** and actresses and fill the particular roles in the play. Auditions can last anywhere from one afternoon to several days, depending on the size of the cast needed and whether or not the director holds callbacks. A *callback* is when an actor is asked to return to see the director a second time. Throughout this entire process, the **stage manager** is an invaluable resource. The stage manager acts as the director's right hand person and a go-between for all the members of the **company** and the director.

*Mary Tyler Moore*

While the actors are rehearsing the action of the play, many others are busy creating the world in which the play will take place. A **set designer** works to physicalize the director's vision for the play through scenery and set pieces. Similarly, a **lighting designer** will use lighting to make the actors visible, of course, but also to create a mood for each scene in the play. The **costume designer** and **makeup artist** ensure the actors look like the characters they will portray.

"The more one does and sees and feels, the more one is able to do, and the more genuine may be one's **appreciation** of fundamental things like home, and love, and understanding companionship."

- Amelia Earhart

Last, but most certainly not least, the **backstage crew** see to it that the production runs smoothly from opening the curtain, to helping with set or costume changes. These men and women usually dress in black so as to not be seen by the audience, and are often referred to as “techies,” because their role is a more technical one. On stage and out front, it may seem that productions go off without a hitch, but be sure that there is a lot of activity happening behind the scenes.

You would never want to ask a lighting designer or electrician for a “lightbulb.” What do they call stage lights?

There are certain “cues” that must be called during a show. A cue is a signal, such as a word or action, used to prompt another event in a performance. This event might be an actor's speech or entrance, a change in lighting, or a sound effect. Sometimes a cue for an actor is simply another actor's line, but other times the cue is one of lighting or sound must be called by the stage manager. The stage manager lets the sound and lighting technicians know when to play a sound cue or change a lighting cue usually by saying “go.” This is called “calling the show.”



From Main Stage to Second Stage, from professional to amateur, all theatre productions require some or all of these roles to be fulfilled. The next time you are at a theatrical production, take a look through the program and see how many of these roles you recognize. Who is in the “cast” – the group of actors performing? Who directed the production? What type of backstage crew was involved? Much like a family, a theatre company works together in a variety of roles to create a living piece of art.

Theatre or Theater?  
Spellings vary from person to person and country to country... “theatre” is a widely accepted spelling among professionals.

# Appreciative

List three things that you appreciate:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

List three things you want to learn more about:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## Section 2: “Supporting Roles”

### *Vocabulary:*

**Audience** – a group of people who participate in an experience or encounter a work of theatre. A necessary element for theatre to take place.

**Front of House** – refers to the portion of the building that is open to the public or the people who work here (box office staff, theatre administration, ushers).

**Publicist** – a person whose business is to publicize a theatre or theatre company’s events.

**Usher** – someone who takes tickets, escorts people to their seats, and/or passes out programs for the production.

**Box Office** – the place where one can purchase tickets to the show.

**House** – the place where the audience is seated (also often refers to the audience itself).

The production has been cast, rehearsed, and tickets sold to a hopefully enthusiastic crowd. The actors are backstage getting ready and warming up and the stage crew is in place. But what about the other side of the curtain?

The administration involved in running a theatre company, or even a single production is no small task. From marketing and advertising the show to passing out programs before the show, many people are needed to ensure that there is an audience on opening night and that that audience is taken care of.

If you’ve ever been to a theatre production, you have played a “supporting role” in the theatre experience... that of the **audience**. The audience is debatably the most important group of people inside the theatre experience. Without them, there would be no theatre, because theatre requires those that are performing as well as those that are viewing the performance.

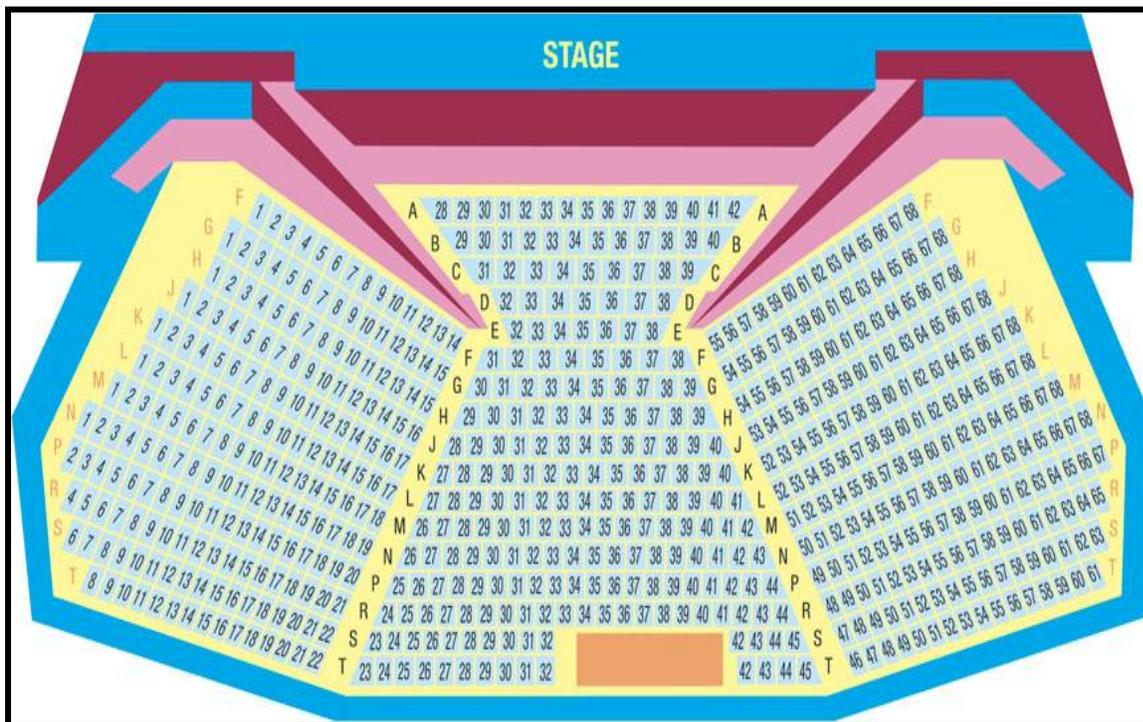
Again, theatre is a living art form and one of the most dynamic aspects of this art form is the audience. Does the audience “get” the play; understand what the director is trying to say? Is the audience energetic, full of life, and responding to what the actors are doing on stage? There is an exchange of energy that takes place between the actors and the audience... both need to be there for a successful experience. Sometimes actors may say to each other backstage, “the audience is dead tonight.” This means that the audience is unresponsive. If an audience is too small, or are spread out all over the house, they may be afraid to respond, laugh, or express themselves for fear of disturbing those around them. This is one reason why

theatres often section off the seating in the house, to encourage the audience to sit close to the front and also closer to each other.

*Actors should be overheard, not listened to, and the audience is 50 percent of the performance."*  
*~ Shirley Booth*

I recently toured my solo show, *Conversations with Airplanes*, to various venues in Saskatchewan, Canada. The show is set on a military base in Saskatchewan. The reaction that I received varied from audience to audience. Much to my surprise, the smallest town that I performed in reacted the most enthusiastically to the show. I later discovered this was because the major themes are common to small town life – in other words, they “got” it. I also performed the show on the military base where it was originally created. The audience there was less vocal, but very much engaged. I found out this was because the play hit them so close to home, the audience remained silently focused as they compared themselves to the main character. Both audiences enjoyed the performance, but reacted differently. Consequently, the performance I gave from one night to another was very different. The first was raucous and absurd, and the second much more emotionally charged. The audience has more control than you might think!

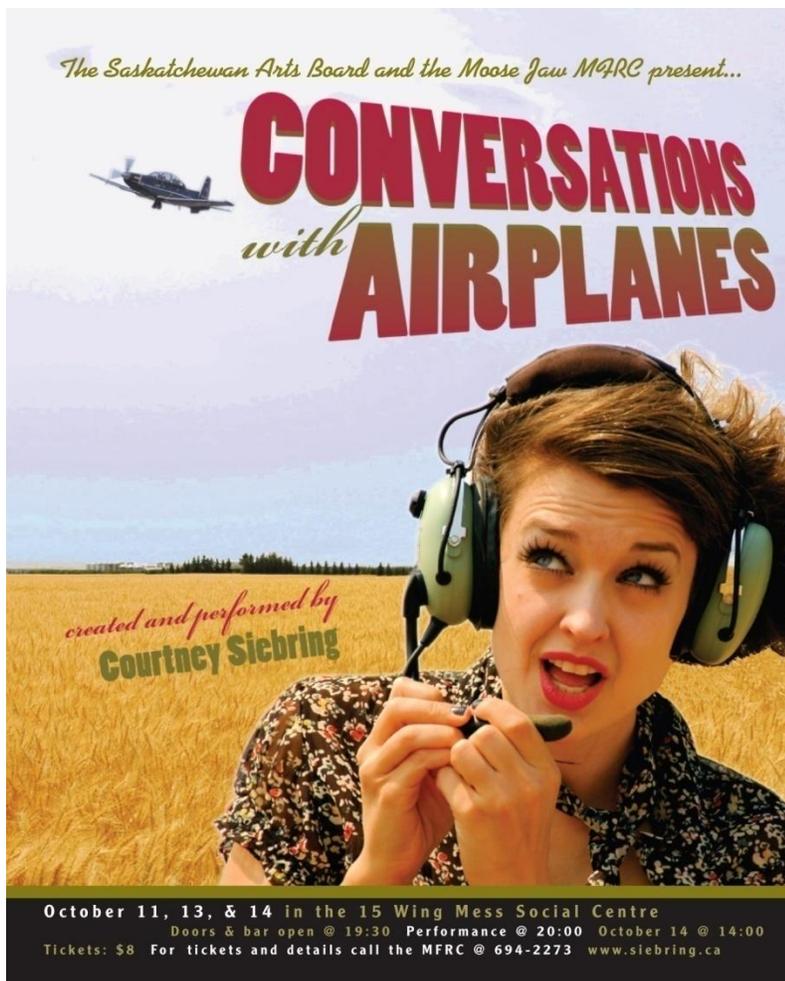
The **house** is where the audience is seated, and sometimes this term is used to refer to the audience themselves. It is usually divided into sections, rows, and seats. This is how tickets are sold when people call the **box office**. Look at the example below:



If you purchase your tickets on-line or over the phone you pick them up at the box office when you arrive, sometimes at a special window for previously purchased tickets called “will call.”

**Ushers** are people who meet the audience at the entrance to the house, or seating area, to direct them to their seats and pass out *programs*. Programs, sometimes called “playbills” are small booklets containing information about the play. They usually include a list of the cast and crew, a synopsis of the play, a note from the director about the performance, and an expression of thanks to others involved. It may also include biographies of the actors and artists involved, information about the playwright, or advertisements for local businesses that support the theatre.

But how did the audience hear about the production in the first place? Without good marketing and advertising, it wouldn’t matter how wonderful the director was, or talented the actors and designers... no one would know about the play. This is where the role of **publicist** comes in. Larger theatres hire publicists to get the word out about their productions. With smaller companies this role may be the dual responsibility of one of the company members.



The job title says it all, the publicist tries to get as much publicity for the production as possible. This includes sending a *press release* to local newspapers, television, and radio stations. A press release is a short article announcing the production and including all of the pertinent information such as the title, author, director, dates, times, and ticket information.

Creating an eye-catching poster is another form of advertising. The poster will usually include an image either from the show or inspired by the show as well as dates, times, and ticket information. If there have been any positive *reviews* of the show or if a well known actor or director were involved with the production, these might be included on the poster as well to attract people’s interest. A

review is something that we will discuss later in this unit, but let’s briefly define it as a critical

evaluation of a production by someone called a “theatre critic,” usually someone from the local media.

The audience holds the largest supporting role in a theatre production. Without them, there is no show. They can affect the outcome of a performance by the way they respond, vocalize their impressions of what’s happening on stage, and the energy they give off. Consider this the next time you go to see a live performance... how can you be a good audience member?

*Appreciative*

Appreciation

**Appreciate**

In the theatre, we applaud to show our appreciation for the performance... what about in real life?  
What do you do to show your appreciation...

For your teachers? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

For your parents? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

For your friends? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

For your personal freedoms? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

For your community? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

For the environment? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

For the kindness of strangers? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Teacher scores & initials: \_\_\_\_\_

## Chapter 1 Review



1. Who would you describe as the “big boss” of a theatre production and what does his/her job entail?

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2. What is a theatre “season” and typically when does a season run?

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3. What is a “new work” and how is it developed?

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4. What is a “Second Stage” and what is another name for it?

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5. What does it mean for a stage manager to “call a cue?”

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6. How can an audience affect the outcome of a play?

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7. What is a “press release” and why is it important to a theatre production?

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8. What is another name for a “program” and what is included in it?

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9. According to the seating plan seen earlier in this section, is J 66 a good seat? Why or not? Where would you prefer to sit?

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10. On a separate sheet of paper or on your computer, create a poster for an upcoming play. Create the title, the director, the playwright, the dates, times, and ticket information yourself. You may want to include some “reviews” of the show or the name of a “famous” actor or director to catch your potential audiences’ eye.

Poster – Teacher’s Initial’s



### Whose Job Is It?

(2 points each)

Director  
Playwright  
Set Designer  
Makeup Artist

Stage Manager  
Choreographer  
Lighting Designer  
Backstage Crew

Actor  
Music Director  
Costume Designer  
Artistic Director

1. To tell the actors where to stand or move on stage? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. To select the plays for a theatre company’s season? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. To create and teach dances or special movement to the actors of a production? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. To write the text for a production? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. To make an actor look older or younger on stage? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. To keep a record of all of the actors’ contact information? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. To dress the actors according to character and time period? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. To move scenery or set pieces on and off stage? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. To help the audience envision the location of the play? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. To create a certain mood or feel for a production? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Total Score:** \_\_\_\_ / 50

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## *Chapter 2: The Elements*

We've taken a look at all of the different people involved in creating, rehearsing, and producing a theatre production and now it's time to explore the different *elements* of theatre. You might think of these concepts as pieces to a puzzle. Once you understand each one, you'll be better able to analyze or critique a piece of theatre and knowledgeably explain why you like or dislike it.

Each of these elements can be found in some form in any play or theatrical production: spectacle, music, thought, language, character, and plot. But what do they mean? I'm glad you asked!

### Objectives:

- To be able to define and identify six major elements of theatre
- To watch a performance and be able to pinpoint these elements
- To gain a better understanding of theatre as art and use these skills to analyze and critic theatre

- **Extra Credit:** Go back to the source. Read Aristotle's *Poetics*, which has become a foundation for theatre criticism.

### Vocabulary:

**Spectacle:** refers to the visual aspects of a production – lights, costumes, staging, set, etc.

**Music:** refers to the sounds of a production – instrumental, vocal, sound effects, etc.

**Thought:** refers to the play's meaning – themes, symbolism, message, and subject.

**Language:** refers to the words of a play which influence the play's rhythm, emotion, subtext, and character development.

**Character:** the people of the play – protagonist, antagonist, etc.

**Plot:** refers to how a play is structured – scenes and acts

## Section 1: Spectacle and Music

The first thing that you will probably notice when you enter a theater to see a play can be categorized under the title, “spectacle.” **Spectacle** refers to all of the visual aspects of the play such as lighting, set, staging, costumes, and makeup for example. Because these things are on the surface and most apparent, chances are that they will give you your first clues about the play you will see.



Spectacle tells you where you are. By looking at a play’s set, you can immediately get a sense of where and perhaps even when the play takes place. It also will tell you how important this environment is to the play’s action. Is it a detailed living room? Or perhaps it is a bare stage with only a chair sitting center.



Spectacle enhances characterization. From scenery to costume and makeup, you can begin to get an idea of the characters in the play. Is there an easy chair with a knitting basket sitting beside it? What does this say about the character that lives here? Costume and makeup can give you clues as to the time period of the play, the social class of the characters, and age.



Spectacle sets the play's mood and indicates its style. The director's choice of lighting, colors, and shapes on stage will underscore the play's theme and the director's vision. Some styles include comic, tragic, realistic, or nonrealistic.



Spectacle gives clues as to the play's meaning. We will learn about the “thought” of the play in another section of this chapter, but it is good for you to know that subtle use of spectacle can point audience members to the play's meaning. Visual cues can create a feeling of order or chaos; gloom or light-heartedness; tension or harmony.

Spectacle grabs and holds the audience's interest. It is typical of musical theatre productions where the play's meaning is normally simplistic, for the director to include a great amount of spectacle such as costume, make up, and ornate set pieces to capture the audience's attention. In other plays, where thought is the pervading element, less spectacle may be incorporated to keep the play focused on the psychological action.

Spectacle gives the audience a pleasant aesthetic experience.

Much like looking at a painting or sculpture, taking in the spectacle of a production can be a satisfying experience in and of itself. The changes of scenery, lighting or movement on stage can be like watching a living photograph.





The second thing that you'll probably notice after you've entered a theater to watch a performance is the sound of the play. We call this the play's **music**. More often than not, directors select "pre show" music to be played before the performance as the audience is coming into the house and finding their seats. This music will generally provide clues to the play's theme, mood, style, and meaning. A light hearted melody could create a positive mood and might indicate that the play will open on a happy "note." The lyrics of certain songs might give clues as well.

Instrumental music is often used throughout a play as a means of transition from one scene to another or to underscore a particular section of dialogue. Just as music is used in movies to induce a certain feeling, music can be used in plays to bring the audience to a particular place emotionally. Music can build tension, stir up sympathy, or create a sense of expectancy.

Of course, music created by instruments isn't the only sound you will hear during a play. Most notably, you'll hear the actor's voices. Actor's voices contribute significantly to the play's music. If the director has a wide range of choices when it comes to actors, he or she may choose actors with contrasting voices to greater enhance the sound of a play and also to help the audience recognize the characters simply by the way they speak.

Another form of music within the context of theatre is sound effects. Sound effects can enhance a play's setting. For example, is it a dark and stormy night? Thunder and lightning sound effects can help get this across to the audience. Perhaps the sounds of heavy traffic and honking car horns will tell the audience that they are in the big city.



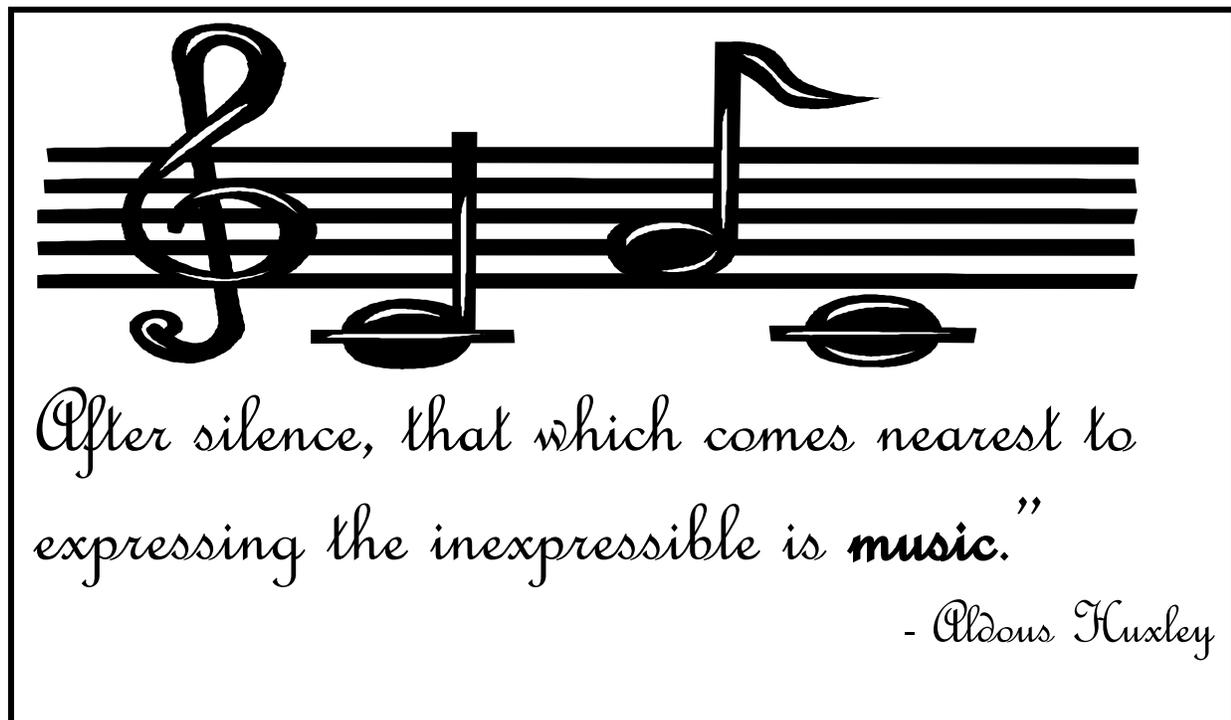
Sound effects are also cues that further action on stage. A doorbell will prompt one actor to answer it, and another actor to enter the scene. A phone ringing will further the plot as soon as the characters on either end engage in a conversation.

Although sound effects are often recorded and played over a theater's sound system, they can also be played live. Particular styles of theatre, such as vaudeville, physical theatre, outdoor summer stock theatre, or clown sometimes use live, onstage sound effects and music as a part of their act. In site-specific theatre (a performance created around a particular location) the company may use the inherent sound effects around them - a rushing stream or noisy power plant – to enhance the play.

Can you think of any other kinds of “music” you might hear during a play? Silence isn't often thought of as something you *hear*, but it is a part of a play's music. The lack of sound can provide as much emotion or insight into character and theme as instrumental music or the actor's voices.

Many plays use multi-media to enhance both the spectacle and music of their productions. Projected images onto a screen might serve as a backdrop or video might be incorporated into the play.

Seeing and hearing are the senses by which you gather information about a play. It is through spectacle and music that you are able to discover the other elements of the play such as language, thought, character, and plot.



## **Section 2: Language and Thought**

When we talk about the **language** of a play, we are referring to the play's words. These words affect many aspects of the play including the play's rhythm, emotion, subtext, and character development.

One example of a play that relies heavily on language to carry it would be any Shakespeare play. There is a very specific rhythm to Shakespeare's plays (called iambic pentameter), as well as style of speech. In Shakespeare's day there was a distinct class difference between community members, and one way this would be discernable was through language. For instance, a lower class citizen would use a more vulgar language, and a higher class citizen might have a wider vocabulary, free from common slang.

Another playwright who is famous for his rhythm in language is David Mamet, a well respected contemporary playwright. The dialogue in many of his plays is noted as being clever, terse, street-smart, and very stylized. The edge that many of his characters have is reflected in the rhythmic patterns of their dialogue.

Just as music stirs emotion, so can the language of a play. Poetic and lyrical or abrupt and harsh, the words a playwright uses and the way in which the actor delivers them can set the tone of a play. Read the following dialogue from David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*:

**Moss:** No. What do you mean? Have I talked to him about *this* [Pause]

**Aaronow:** Yes. I mean are you actually *talking* about this, or are we just...

**Moss:** No, we're just...

**Aaronow:** We're just "*talking*" about it.

**Moss:** We're just *speaking* about it. [Pause] As an *idea*.

**Aaronow:** As an idea.

**Moss:** Yes.

**Aaronow:** We're not actually *talking* about it.

**Moss:** No.

**Aaronow:** Talking about it as a...

**Moss:** *No*.

**Aaronow:** As a *robbery*.

**Moss:** As a "*robbery*"? No.

As you can see, the language of Mamet's play has a life of its own. It adds richness to his characters, because the way they speak, not just the way they act is very specific to the type of person they are. It also has a rhythm to it, as mentioned before. The language of a play can set a kind of tempo that carries the audience along.

*Subtext* refers to the meaning behind the words, and is a very important part of a play's language. As human beings, we often don't say what we mean or mean what we say – just one of the many complexities of the human experience. It's in the subtext, the words behind the words where our true desires and motives come out. A good playwright knows this and his character's words will reflect this idea.

The **thought** of a play is the play's meaning and next to character, is one of the most important elements of the play in my opinion. If a director isn't clear in presenting the play's thought, then it becomes muddled and confusing – not very enjoyable to watch. When we talk about a play's thought we use words like subject, theme, or message.

Simply put the *subject* is what the play is about – revenge, love, family ties, loneliness, or coming of age. The subject is generally an abstract idea. The play's *theme* is the playwright's point of view about the subject. So a play could be about coming of age and the playwright's point of view could focus on the awkwardness, trials, and tribulations of being a teenager. Or perhaps it is a play about coming of age and the playwright has chosen to focus on the adventure and curiosity that comes with growing up. One subject can have many different themes.

When we talk about *message*, we are referring to what the playwright (or director) wants to say. In the Unit Review assignment at the end of this chapter, you will watch a play. Being able to identify and understand the play's message will be a large part of this assignment. A play's message doesn't have to be preachy, but in any good play it will be present. So ask yourself, what is this play trying to communicate?

A play's title might be a large clue to the plays subject or theme. For example think about *Our Town*, *The Death of a Salesman*, *Waiting for Godot*, or *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* (this play is commonly referred to as simply *Marat/Sade*). That last title leaves very little to question!

Understanding the context in which the play was written or first performed can help to give you insight into the play's meaning. The period in history, personal background of the playwright, or the social issues occurring in the playwright's country or home town most likely affect the play's meaning, subject, and theme.

The thought of a play is the intellectual focus. It is the aspect of the play that brings up questions and becomes the topic of discussion on the ride home from the theatre after the curtain goes down. The thought of a play is emphasized and highlighted by other elements of the theatre such as spectacle (symbolism) or music, and delivered through language, character, and plot.



## **Section 3: Character and Plot**

**Character** refers to the people of the play – the playwright’s vessels to deliver the play’s *thought* through *music* or *language* and who further the *plot* while staging a *spectacle*. Wow... you can really see how central character is to the play, can’t you? Without character, it would be a dance, a performance art piece, or a public speech. But with rich and bizarre characters who remind us of people from our own lives and experiences, we have a play – a story that we relate to and draw meaning from.

You will learn in “Acting 2” that conflict is the essence of drama. It is characters responding to the conflict between each other within the structure of a story or plot. Because the characters are the heart and soul of a play, they are the central foundation for drama. As you continue your studies through into to “Acting 2” you will learn much more about character from an actor’s point of view, but for now, as an audience member, there are a few things you should know about character.

In a play the characters all want something. This is called their “objective” or “goal.” This is the driving force behind everything they say and everything they do – they are working towards getting what they want. Just as in real life, there are usually some bumps along the way to getting what you want. In a play these bumps cause the conflict. They are called “obstacles,” and are the things that block a character from achieving his or her “goal.” Finally, “tactics” are strategies that the character uses to circumvent the obstacle and continue after their goal.

Watch to see what motivates a character and how that furthers the **plot** along. Plot is how a play is constructed – the moments of the play and how they are sewn together. So, if *story* is a narrative of events, then the plot is the why – the reasons for how events of the story happened. It is a series of cause-effect relationships. You will learn more about plot and play structure when you study “Playwriting” and “Directing.”

As you can see, there are many different elements that go into a single production and each one is connected to and overlaps the others. When you go to the theatre to complete your final assignment in this Unit, you will practice recognizing each of these elements and their importance to a successful production.

### **THEATRE TRADITIONS**

The theatre is full of traditions, both for actors as well as theatre goers. You would never tell an actor “good luck,” for example – the tradition is to tell them to “break a leg.” A performer would never appear in costume and make up to receive the audience, another tradition. It is also tradition for audience members to bring flowers for their favorite performers. Some performers consider it bad luck to discuss a play while still in the theatre, and the granddaddy of them all – a performer would never say, “MacBeth” in the theatre, a long standing superstition that has become tradition.



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## Chapter 3: Theatre and Culture

Art has been referred to as the imitation of life. Theatre in particular is seen as an imitation because it is a living form. But cultures use art and theatre to do more than simply imitate the life around them. Through the creation process and through witnessing the outcome of that process, cultures and communities are interpreting the world around them. I don't have to tell you that we all have different fields of experience, opinions, and perceptions, especially when it comes to the things we are most passionate about. Throughout history theatre has been used as a means of explaining, exploring, and expounding on the mysteries of the universe.

### Section 1: Cultural Differences

Just as clothing, language, food, and family life takes on a different look from culture to culture and community to community, the same is so with theatre. Cultural differences such as religion, history, and even geographical region influence the form and style of a particular community's theatre.

The Eastern world, for example, has a much different way of storytelling than the Western world. In North America, in particular, we are used to hearing stories that are very linear – with a beginning, middle, and an end. The Eastern style of storytelling is often non-linear, and may jump from beginning to middle and back to the beginning.



Think of each of the six elements we covered in the previous chapter, spectacle, music, language, thought, character, plot. Each of these are affected and influenced by the culture in which the play or production is being performed. The style of costumes, music, the language it is written and performed in, the types of message that are being conveyed, and the kinds of characters that tell the story... all differ from culture to culture.

You will learn more about these cultural differences when you study the Units on "Styles" and "History." Much of the differences have to do with personal taste. After all, as we learned at the beginning of *this* unit, the audience plays a big role in deciding what the theatre produces. Without the audience, there can be no theatre. Some cultures prefer large-scale spectacles with masks, elaborate costumes, onstage

musicians, life size puppets, or ornate sets. Others prefer realistic plays that have almost a cinematic quality – stories that are deeply psychological. Clown and mime are art forms that are well respected in Western Europe, but aren't full understood or appreciated in North America.

Art in general and theatre and film in particular have been a strong influence on many culture's values and behaviors. Because film and television reach a wider audience in a shorter amount of time, their influences on society are more readily felt. Superficial affects might include new fashion trends (think of Jennifer Aniston's hairstyle in the early 90's as seen on the TV show, *Friends*) or popular phrases (think of "way" or "not" from the movie, *Wayne's World*). Larger scale affects could include changes in what restaurants serve (think of MacDonald's and other fast food restaurants' reaction to the documentary, *Supersize Me*) or the amount of violence that the average child is used to seeing on screen at a very young age versus a child of say, 20 years ago.



Theatre and film influence culture. The reverse is also true, perhaps more so... theatre and film are *affected by* the culture and society in which they are created. As it was said earlier, art is an imitation of life. Playwrights, film makers, and theatre artists create works that speak about the culture in which they live.

Plays and films that are based on actual events are great examples of this. *The Laramie Project*, for instance was a play (and later a movie) about a teenage boy in a small town who was the victim of a hate crime. Although extremely controversial, this work began an international conversation about human behavior. Another play called, *Twilight in Los Angeles 1992* is based on the events of the L.A. Riots of 1992. More recently, several films have come out recounted the 9/11 attacks of 2001. There have been countless plays and film created based on true stories or historical accounts. Art of every kind has been used throughout human history to work through and discuss social maladies.

Actors, playwrights, directors, and film makers are politicians and prophets in their own right as they use art and creativity to bring about discussion on social issues. So much can be learned about a culture – what it values, what it believes, what it struggles with - by viewing its art.

"Any form of art is a form of power; it has impact, it can affect change it can not only move us, it makes us move."

- Ossie Davis

## Section 2: Audience as Critic

Audiences vary by many factors and therefore will have a different take on any one piece of theatre. We all have different aesthetic tastes, levels of education, socio-economic backgrounds, and are from different communities, so of course we will have different opinions when it comes to the value of a particular work of art.

“I loved every minute of it! ★★★★★!”

- Joe Smith, *Just Made Your Day Review*

Professional theatre critics have been causing actors, directors, playwrights, and producers much joy and pain for years. The audience has

been said to be the final critic, after all – they are the ones going out to the theatre (or staying home as the case may be). In your final Unit assignment, this critic will be you. Criticism is the act of making judgments. A critic must understand what the artists were trying to do, discern how well they did it, and comment on the art’s overall value by asking, “Was it worth doing?”

Although art is subjective in many ways, there are methods for objectively

“What was the director thinking? I’m only giving a full star, because I can’t figure out how to cut the things in half! ★”

- Rob Jones, *Don’t Quit Your Day Job Gazette*

critiquing a piece of art. The process begins with the experience. You must experience the performance – go see the play. Simple enough. The second stage of the process involves analysis – you must critically analyze what you saw. Finally, you communicate your response to the performance – by writing a review or discussing it with others.

The artists who created the piece of theatre you will experience had an *intention*, this is what they were trying to say. You as the audience member, have a *perception*, that is what you think the artists were trying to say. Your perception may or may not line up with the artists’ intentions. Finally *interpretation* refers to the meaning that you, the audience member, derives from the performance.

When you analyze a piece of theatre, you can refer back to the six elements of theatre that we discussed in the previous chapter:

- Spectacle: How well did the visual affects entertain and support the other elements of the play?
- Music: How well did the sounds of the play support the other elements of the play?
- Language: Did the actors understand what the playwright’s intentions were? Did they reveal this clearly?
- Thought: Did you get a strong sense of the play’s message? Was it thought provoking?

- Character: How clearly defined were the characters? Did the actors have clear goals and desires?
- Plot: Did all of the other elements come together to further the plot?

In your final assignment you will go see a play and write a critic of what you saw where you will discuss all six of these elements as well as your own interpretation of the play. You must be able to **describe** what you saw. This doesn't involve opinion so much as statement of fact. Then you will **analyze** what you saw. This is where you discuss how well each element of theatre was executed and bring forth the strengths and weaknesses of the play. Next you will **interpret** what you saw. From your own background and field of experience, what did the play "say" to you? What do you think were the artists' intentions and how well did they present those intentions? The final step in this process of criticism is **judgment**. This is where you give the play a *thumbs up* or *thumbs down*. You should be able to support your judgment.

## Appreciative Heart = Good Medicine

Recent studies have shown that the health of one's heart is linked to far more than just diet and exercise... it is also linked to the state of your emotional heart!

The HeartMath Institute of North California has done studies on the subject and has concluded that the heart is more than just a pump. Stress or negative emotions cause the heart to have to work harder.

When a person is feeling angry, depressed, or frustrated, their heart rhythms are actually more erratic. Conversely, when a person is feeling positive emotions such as compassion, happiness, or appreciation, their heart's rhythms are smoother - healthier.

Appreciation, or gratitude, is one very healthy emotion! The reason is that it is easy to "self-generate." In other words, it is easy for a person to induce this emotion themselves rather than waiting on a situation to cause them to feel that way. Most people can think of a time where they felt great appreciation or gratitude.

So, do your heart a favor and count your blessings! Showing appreciation and giving others a reason to feel appreciation, too, will make your heart healthier.

*This unit has no test. The final score for this unit will be from the Project plus the Questions as follows: Review Project = 50% + Matching Questions = 50%*

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## ***Theatre 101 Review Project***

50 points *This Review should be at least two hand written pages or one full typed page.*

Your assignment for this Unit Review Project is to go see a play and write a review about it based on all of the lessons in this unit. Be sure to save the program, as it will help you as you write your review.

The review needs to include the following elements:

### The People:

- Save the program to turn in.
- Include in your review important people who made the production possible, look back over Chapter 1 to help you with this.
- As you describe the play and talk about what you liked and didn't like, be sure to mention the people involved – main actors, directors, stage manager, etc... include all of the people listed in your vocabulary as it applies to the particular show you see.

### The Elements:

- Chapter 2 will help you with this one.
- This is going to be the bulk of your review – I want to know how each element was used in the play that you saw.
- What was the play's theme?
- How were spectacle and music used to support this theme?
- How did the characters in the play support the theme and further the plot?
- What was the plot of the play? The story?
- How did the playwright use language? Did the director and actors enhance or take away from this?

### Theatre and Culture

- Lastly, you will relate the play back to yourself and the community/culture in which you live.
- How did the play reflect your culture?
- How did the play challenge or question your culture?
- What impact, if any, do you think this play has had or will have on your culture?

Your teacher will grade you on content, creativity, and clarity.

**Total Score: \_\_\_\_/50**

**Match each vocabulary word with its meaning and place the correct letter on the blank.**

*(2 points each)*

- |                                   |          |  |
|-----------------------------------|----------|--|
| _____ 1. <b>Artistic Director</b> | <b>A</b> | literary advisor for a theater who works with playwrights, selects & edits scripts   |
| _____ 2. <b>Playwright</b>        | <b>B</b> | designs and creates the dance elements and arrangements for a show   |
| _____ 3. <b>Director</b>          | <b>C</b> | refers to how a play is structured – scenes and acts   |
| _____ 4. <b>Stage manager</b>     | <b>D</b> | individual with the ultimate artistic control of the theatre's production choices, directorial choices and overall artistic vision               |
| _____ 5. <b>Company</b>           | <b>E</b> | the person whose responsibility it is to design costumes   |
| _____ 6. <b>Backstage Crew</b>    | <b>F</b> | refers to the sounds of a production – instrumental, vocal, sound effects  |
| _____ 7. <b>Actor</b>             | <b>G</b> | person whose business is to publicize a theatre or theatre company's events  |
| _____ 8. <b>Costume Designer</b>  | <b>H</b> | person who creates scripts for live performances; dramatist  |
| _____ 9. <b>Lighting Designer</b> | <b>I</b> | one who acts   |
| _____ 10. <b>Makeup artist</b>    | <b>J</b> | work behind the scenes to assist with the smooth operation of all productions  |
| _____ 11. <b>Set Designer</b>     | <b>K</b> | place where one can purchase tickets to the show   |
| _____ 12. <b>Choreographer</b>    | <b>L</b> | refers to all the different people involved with a particular production   |
| _____ 13. <b>Dramaturge</b>       | <b>M</b> | refers to the play's meaning – themes, symbolism, message, and subject   |
| _____ 14. <b>Audience</b>         | <b>N</b> | portion of the building that is open to the public or the people who work here   |
| _____ 15. <b>Front of House</b>   | <b>O</b> | an artist who creates makeup and prosthetics for the production  |
| _____ 16. <b>Publicist</b>        | <b>P</b> | a group of people who participate in an experience or encounter a work of theatre  |
| _____ 17. <b>Usher</b>            | <b>Q</b> | works with the director; and, set, costume, & sound designer; and choreographer to create an overall 'look' for the show in response to the text |
| _____ 18. <b>Box Office</b>       | <b>R</b> | refers to the words of a play which influence the play's rhythm, emotion, subtext, and character development                                     |
| _____ 19. <b>House</b>            | <b>S</b> | someone who provides practical and organizational support to the director, actors, designers, stage crew   |
| _____ 20. <b>Spectacle</b>        | <b>T</b> | someone who takes tickets, escorts people to their seats, and/or passes out programs   |
| _____ 21. <b>Music</b>            | <b>U</b> | someone who designs the physical surroundings in which the action will happen  |
| _____ 22. <b>Thought</b>          | <b>V</b> | coordinator of all artistic and technical aspects of any production  |
| _____ 23. <b>Language</b>         | <b>W</b> | refers to the visual aspects of a production – lights, costumes, staging, set  |
| _____ 24. <b>Character</b>        | <b>X</b> | place where the audience is seated   |
| _____ 25. <b>Plot</b>             | <b>Y</b> | refers to how a play is structured – scenes and acts   |

**Total Score: \_\_\_\_/50**

