

Preface: An Introduction to the Study of Theatre Arts

How would you like to be introduced to a subject, a discipline of study, that has the potential to change your life? If you're lucky in your academic pursuits, you'll encounter some classes that have the ability to give you information that stays with you forever. There are ideas, or skills, or just general information that has such a broad application, that we remember it, and use it, no matter what we decide to do or where we travel in our lifetime. That's a tall order to fill, but the arts, in general, and theatre arts, in particular, have that potential—to change your life, to give you something that you can carry with you always. I know what you're thinking, that I'm prejudiced toward the subject in this textbook, but that's not it.

A lot of disciplines have the potential to increase your knowledge and skills in a variety of ways. What is perhaps unique about studying the arts is that these disciplines have the ability to increase your knowledge, your skills, and your humanity, as well. And, I'll argue, learning to understand ourselves better, and to better empathize and appreciate others, will enrich whatever skills and knowledge we possess.

There's a good reason that a course like Theatre Appreciation, or Introduction to Theatre Arts, is a general education option at most colleges and universities, meaning that students majoring in the vast majority of disciplines across campus can count this course in the collection of courses they can use to complete their degree requirements. The implication is that the information gained in a course like this is applicable to ANY other discipline. There are things in this subject matter that will compliment whatever other subjects you study. Maybe I'm stating the obvious, but I don't think we stop and think about it often enough. If your perception is that this subject will merely inform you about how to put on a good play, then you're mistaken. If you believe that live theatre exists solely for the purpose of entertaining an audience, then you're wrong again. If, on the other hand, the majority of you approach this subject with, at least, an awareness that theatre probably involves much more than you ever imagined, then you're in a good place to begin your studies in this subject. Few subjects are more complex. Even fewer subjects will require that you master such a broad variety of skills; physical, artistic/creative, intellectual, social and even, on occasion, political awareness. And, I haven't even begun. To do theatre well, or to master any of the dozens of specialty areas within theatre arts, you have to be smart. In some cases, very, very smart. To do theatre well is a tough undertaking. It requires the brains and talents of dozens, sometimes hundreds, of smart

people. To say that theatre is a labor-intensive undertaking, is nearly an understatement. Don't make the mistake of starting this textbook, or this course, underestimating the nature of theatre arts.

We forget sometimes that the majority of students who take an 'Introduction to Theatre' or 'Theatre Appreciation' course are not necessarily theatre arts majors. The majority of students in this class are science majors, humanities majors, English students, nursing students, pre-law, or public policy majors. These students are taking this class in theatre arts for many reasons; because the course is a general education option, an elective credit that will fulfill the basic requirements of their bachelor's degree in some other field, or because they had a small role in a high school play and they want to learn more about the craft, or they think it's an easy grade. "Sounds like fun," they think. "I'll get to see plays."

At colleges and universities where this class is an option under the general education core requirements for any undergraduate major, the vast majority of students taking this class will not be theatre arts majors. In fact, many undergraduate theatre arts departments do not require that their theatre arts majors take this class. After all, theatre arts majors will eventually complete individual courses in scenic, costume and lighting design, acting, voice and movement for the stage, theatre criticism, stage management, dramatic literature, and theatre history. These subjects, as well as others pertinent to the theatre arts discipline, are only 'introduced' in this 'introductory' course.

Many theatre arts departments, however, do require theatre arts majors take the 'introductory' course in this discipline. Look around the classroom. Can you pick these theatre arts 'people' out from the rest of the students? Chances are you can. They tend to interact more openly with other students. The average theatre arts student is often more demonstrative, more animated, and much more vocal. Many of them already know how to 'perform' and they're not shy. That's not always the case, but it's often true.

Theatre students in this class, too, should expect that they'll receive at least a cursory knowledge of the different aspects of the art; aspects that they'll explore in more detail when they take courses in stagecraft, design, technical theatre, acting, theatre history, stage combat, playwriting and more. This 'introductory' course will lay the foundation upon which theatre arts majors will build their knowledge and skills as practitioners and scholars in the discipline. If you are a serious theatre arts major, then you're in the right place in this class.

And what's in this course for the non-theatre arts major? Is there something here for you? Oh, yeah. By some accounts, students in this class who are not planning to major in theatre will have more to gain from this subject matter than students who plan to work toward a degree in theatre arts. Suffice to say for now that many of the skills and knowledge that theatre arts students routinely study are applicable to anyone's life. This idea will be illuminated further in the first chapter. So, read on.

That's the primary reason I wrote this textbook. I believe that this discipline, this study of the art of theatre, has something to teach everyone, regardless of your personal educational and professional aspirations. This class is designed to provide you with information that is applicable in your

studies, in your occupation, and in your life, regardless of what you choose to study, your chosen vocation, or how you lead your life.

Theatre, by its very nature, is about life . . . everyone's life, not just the theatre world. My contention that the theatre arts have something to offer a world outside the stage is not a myth. It's a fact. The approach in this textbook proves it.

This connection between theatre and the rest of mankind, this contention that the theatre arts have global significance, was expressed well by Shakespeare when he wrote:

*All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time
plays many parts . . .*

As You Like It, II, vii

I wrote this text, too, because we, in the theatre arts industry, often isolate ourselves from the rest of the world. It's not surprising why we evolve this way. No major in higher education requires more time and dedication to their craft and their studies than do the theatre arts. Theatre students start classes as early as 7:00 A.M. They are out of class and begin work on production activities around noon, and then start rehearsals that go from 6:00 P.M. until all hours of the late night. They're up, again, early the next morning for class. When most classes across campus are out for the weekend, theatre production work and rehearsals continue day and night. It's no wonder that theatre arts students have little time for social events, fraternity gatherings, and university sports. They're just too busy. Consequently, theatre students are often seen as strange and cliquish to the campus community at large.

This text encourages students in this discipline to think outside the box that is the theatre world; to rage against their isolation in a labor-intensive discipline. By the way, the word "discipline" is a double entendre when referring to students who study theatre in higher education. Only through serious discipline—within the theatre arts discipline—do students have a chance of success.

Good theatre examines life. Events, acted out on a world stage, such as social, cultural, and political movements, and aberrant human behavior, find expression in the theatre. Shakespeare's Hamlet tells us that the "purpose of playing" is

. . . to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pleasure.

Hamlet, III, ii



William Shakespeare
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If theatre practitioners isolate ourselves from the rest of the world, then we fail to relate our art, our industry, to a broader audience. It is for the audience, after all, that we do theatre in the first place. We have something to say, as artists, and the world is our true stage, our palette of colors with which we'll paint our masterpiece. The world is the fodder of all good theatre. Twenty-five hundred years ago the Greeks believed that theatre had only two purposes; to teach and to please—the audience and the players. We'll discuss the Greeks in more detail in Chapter 4.

This is a good place to mention that theatre, like any good art form, will always enlighten us as individuals and as a society. Experiencing good theatre will force us to better understand ourselves and the world in which we live. Theatre is about discovery. It raises questions and calls us to action. It invites change. This is why theatre is often viewed as controversial and dangerous. Going to the movies, bucket of popcorn in hand, is a predominantly passive activity when compared to going to the theatre to see a play. Theatre arts are anything but passive.

Another more contemporary voice and one of the great minds in the theatre world, Bertolt Brecht, said it this way:

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself. Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), "A Short Organum for the Theatre," para. 35 (1949) in Brecht on Theatre, ed. trans. by John Willett (1964).

Brecht believed that theatre wasn't merely a mirror to reflect society. "Art," he said, "is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it." In other words, theatre reflects *and* shapes our reality.

So, like any major in the academy of higher education, theatre arts students have something to learn from the approach taken in this textbook. You'll see.

I'm respectful of the fact that students today are smarter and savvier than every generation before them in higher education. They want to know specifically what the requirements are, and if the information they're fed in sixteen weeks of semester study has any application to their career goals. It's also important to acknowledge that students today process information differently than they did when many of the textbooks in this subject were written. Students in this new millennium learn in sound bites, in high definition graphically-explosive ways. They're more tactile, they know how to use the tools for information processing and retrieval. They have at their fingertips, literally, the world's wealth of knowledge, and they demand to know how this subject will have application to the real world situations they'll encounter. I think that's pretty incredible.

This text will accomplish what I think every foundation course in Theatre Arts should do. It will provide you a basic, solid understanding of the history, theory, and application of the art form. It will also bridge the gap between the study of theatre art and the rest of the world. It will shout out that regardless of your discipline of study, there is something in here for you. If you want to be an architect, then there's something in here for

you. If you want to be a computer programmer, or a heart surgeon, or a lawyer, or an entrepreneur, then there's something in here for you. And, if you want to be a theatre arts practitioner, this is a great place to begin your study.

Finally, I also wrote this textbook because I wanted to give students and instructors a better tool for studying the specific subject matter, An Introduction to, An Appreciation of, theatre arts.

By the way, this text takes a logical approach to the study of theatre, divided into three parts: Part one examines the benefits to anyone that are inherent in studying this art form, and we'll explore a bit of the history, context and physical structures required of theatre, part two explores the individual artists who do theatre, and part three will discuss the specifics of performance, different types of academic degrees, and the future of theatre arts.

Ultimately, all theatre is a celebration of life. It showcases our humanity with all of its flaws, imperfections and beauty. Great plays in live performance are about us, our personal reality, our consciousness, our greater universe, both real and imagined.

Have fun.