DRAMATURGY: THE CONSTRUCTION OF DRAMA AND DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE

A play is action, but it is patterned action. Unlike the action of a street riot, say, dramatic action has clearly identifiable components and a specified beginning and ending. Even when improvised or radically experimental, a play's dramatic action tends to be crafted in well-understood compositional patterns. We call these patterns a play's dramaturgy.

Action provides a play's thrills and excitement; dramaturgy provides momentum and meaning—so that a play's action becomes increasingly compelling and significant as the play heads toward an eventual climax and resolution. Dramaturgical devices lead an audience to see the play's action as consequential, rather than as a random series of events. The most successful dramaturgy, though buried deep within a play's dialogue and appearance, can create a profound engagement with the audience's thoughts, fantasies, and feelings.

Students of drama often visualize two intersecting axes along which they can analyze a play's dramaturgical techniques: a "vertical" axis where the play's various components (what it's composed of) can be identified, and a "horizontal" axis where the temporal structure of the performance—the order and timing of what happens—can be examined. Both perspectives are immensely useful to students, appreciators, and creators of drama.

Drama's Components: The Vertical Axis

The division of plays into components is an ancient analytical practice begun by Aristotle. He identified six components of a tragedy (by which he meant a generally serious drama): plot, characters, theme, diction, music, and spectacle—in that order. With some modification and elaboration, Aristotle's list still provides a breakdown of the major elements of most dramas, although the importance of each component is a matter of continuing controversy.

Plot Although we may think of plot as synonymous with story, the meanings of the two words are quite different. The story is simply the narrative of what happens in the play, as might be described by someone who has seen it. Plot refers to the mechanics of storytelling: the sequencing of the characters' comings and goings, the timetable of the play's events, and the specific ordering of the revelations, reversals, quarrels, discoveries, and actions that take place onstage. (In English theatres of the sixteenth century, a written "platte," or "plotte," was hung on the wall backstage to remind the actors of the play's order of major events, entrances, and exits.) Plot is therefore the structure of actions: both outer actions (such as Romeo stabbing Tybalt) and inner ones (such as Romeo falling in love with Juliet).

Perhaps Aristotle listed plot first among drama's six elements because plot is what makes drama dramatic. Creating a compelling plot is often the most demanding test of a playwright's skill, for plot normally keeps the audience involved (and increasingly involved) during the play's two-plus-hour duration.

The primary demands of plot are logic and suspense. To satisfy the demand for logic, the actions portrayed must be plausible, and events must follow one upon another in an organic rather than an arbitrary fashion. To create and sustain suspense, however, these actions must set up expectations for further actions, drawing the audience through a plot that seems to move inescapably toward an ending that may be sensed but is never wholly predictable. "Well-made plays," as farces and melodramas of the late nineteenth century were called, relied heavily on intricate and suspenseful plots, and elements of these forms (or in some cases the forms themselves) are evidenced in many stage plays today.

Characters Characters are the human figures—the impersonated presences—who undertake the actions of the plot. Their potency in the theatre is measured by our interest in them as people. The most brilliant plotting cannot redeem a play if the audience remains indifferent to its characters; therefore, the fundamental demand of a play's characters is that they make the audience care. Characters cannot be mere stick figures, no matter how elaborately detailed. The great dramatic characters of the past—Hamlet, Juliet, Stanley Kowalski, Blanche DuBois, to name a few—bring to an experienced theatergoer's or playreader's mind personalities as vivid and memorable as the personalities of good friends (and hated enemies). They are whole images, indelibly human, alive with the attributes, feelings, and expectations of real people. We can identify with them. We can sympathize with them.

Character depth is what gives a play its psychological complexity, its sensuality, and its warmth. Without character depth we cannot experience love, hate, fear,
joy, hope, despair—any of the emotions we expect to derive from theatre. And a theatre devoid of those emotions that stem from the humanness of the characters portrayed would soon be a theatre without an audience.

**Theme** A play's theme is its abstracted intellectual content. The theme may be described as the play's overall statement: its topic, central idea, or message, as the case may be. Some plays have obvious themes, such as Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (the horrors of war) or Molière's *The Bourgeois Gentleman* (the foolishness of social pretense). Other plays have less clearly defined themes, and the most provocative of these plays have given rise to much scholarly controversy. *Hamlet, Oedipus Tyrannos,* and *Waiting for Godot* all suggest many themes, and each play has spawned fierce debates about which of its themes is central.

Nothing demands that a play have a single theme, however, or that a theme be reducible to any straightforward intellectual generalization. Indeed, plays that are too obviously theme-intensive are often considered too propagandistic or academic for theatrical success: "If you want to send a message," one Broadway saying goes, "use Western Union." (Today we would say, "Text me.") Moreover, although the themes of plays address the central questions of society and humanity, a play's theatrical impact normally hinges—at least in the Aristotelian model—on the audience's engagement with its plot and characterization.

Nevertheless, a play must have something to say, and that something—its theme—must seem pertinent to the audience. Otherwise why would we leave the outside world—filled as it is with actions and "scenes"—to come to the theatre? Further, the play must be sufficiently focused and limited to give the audience at least some insight into that something within its framework. Plays that try to say nothing, or, conversely, plays that try to say everything, rarely have even a modest impact no matter how entertaining or well plotted they may be. Thus playwrights working in every genre, be it tragedy, comedy, melodrama, musical comedy, or farce, have from the beginning of theatrical history learned to narrow and focus their field of intellectual investigation when crafting a play.

**Diction** Aristotle's fourth component, diction, relates not merely to the pronunciation of spoken dialogue. More crucially it refers to the literary character of a play's text, including its tone, imagery, cadence, and articulation, and to the playwright's use of literary forms and figures of speech such as verse, rhyme, metaphor, apostrophe, jest, and epigram.

The value of poetry has been well established from the theatre's beginning; indeed, until fairly recent times, most serious plays were written largely in verse. Today, although the use of verse is relatively rare, all plays continue to demonstrate carefully crafted language. Many, such as those by Tom Stoppard and Richard Greenberg, feature brilliant repartee, stunning epigrams, witty arguments, and dazzling tirades. Other, quite different, sorts of plays may feature rough-textured slang, local dialects, and crude vulgarities, or a poetry of silences and nearly inarticulate mutterings—dictions that can be no less effective than Stoppard's flamboyantly crafted verbal pyrotechnics.

The diction of a play is by no means the creation of the playwright alone. It is very much the product of the actor as well, and for that reason throughout the history of Western theatre, an effective stage voice has been considered the prime asset of the actor. Even today, the study of voice is a primary course at most schools and conservatories of classical acting. The chief aim of such study is to create an acting voice capable of dealing in spectacular fashion with the broad palette of dramatic diction demanded by the works of the world's most noted playwrights.

**Music** Any discussion of music, Aristotle's fifth component, forces us to remember that plays in Aristotle's time were sung or chanted, not simply spoken. That mode of presentation has all but disappeared, yet the musical component remains directly present in most plays performed today and is indirectly present in the rest.

Aristotle's "music" can take many forms. Songs are common in the plays of Shakespeare, as well as in the works of many modern writers. Many naturalistic dramatists work familiar songs into their scripts, sometimes by having the characters sing, at other times by having them play recordings onstage. Anton Chekhov and Tennessee Williams both make extensive use of offstage music. For example, a military marching band can be heard in Chekhov's *The Three Sisters,* and offstage dance-hall music can be heard in Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire* and music from a nearby cantina in his *Night of the Iguana.* More subtly, the music of a play may include a live or an electronically pre-recorded sound score, created and implemented by a sound designer who can provide anything from incidental music between scenes to a full soundscape that intensifies the play's emotional range, punctuates its action, intensifies its rising suspense and climaxes, and moves its audience to an ever-deepening engagement.
Spectacle can be simple but still profound. The image of the aged Nagg and Nell in their ashen faces, trying to kiss, in Samuel Beckett's grimly absurdist Endgame is unforgettable. Shown here are Liz Smith and Geoffrey Hutchings in their 2004 performance at London's Albert Theatre.

Not all of this will be tuneful: vocal tones, footsteps, sighs, shouts, railroad whistles, gunshots, animal cries, the hubbub of crowds, the shrilling of a telephone, and amplified live or special effects (heartbeats, heavy breathing, otherworldly harmonies) may combine into a sonic orchestration of such dramatic force that it can thrill even persons wholly unacquainted with the language of the dialogue.

Spectacle Aristotle's sixth component, spectacle, encompasses the visual aspects of production: scenery, costumes, lighting, makeup, properties, and the overall look of the theatre and stage. It would be wrong to infer that spectacle is synonymous with spectacular, for some productions are quite restrained in their visual artistry. Rather, spectacle here refers to its etymological root, meaning "something seen." Although this point may seem obvious, it is crucial. Theatre is as much a visual experience as it is an aural, emotional, and intellectual experience: the ancient Greeks clearly had this in mind when they chose the name theatron ("seeing place") to designate the site of their performances.

Much as the cinema has been called the art of moving pictures, so the theatre might be called the art of fluid sculpture. This sculpture is fashioned in part from the human body in motion and in part from still or moving scenery and props—natural and manufactured items of both dramatic and decorative importance, all illuminated by natural or artificially modulated light. It is a sculpture that moves in time as well as in space. And although it is primarily a support for the plot, characters, and theme of a play, it has an artistic appeal and an artistic heritage all its own. Certainly some ardent patrons of the theatre pay more attention to settings and costumes than to any other aspect of a play, and dramatic visual effects—such as the chandelier that crashes to the ground at the end of the first act of Phantom of the Opera—have occasionally become the most noted high light of a production.

Memorable visual elements can be both grand and prosaic, imposing and subtle. Nineteenth-century romanticism, which survives today primarily in the form of grand opera, tends to favor elaborate palaces, impressive crowd scenes, parades of circus animals, and lavish, overscale costumes. In contrast, twentieth- and twenty-first-century dramas are more likely to be dressed in domestic environments and archetypal images: Jimmy and Cliff reading newspapers while Alison iron a shirt in John Osborne's Look Back in Anger; Laura playing with her glass animals in Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie; Mother Courage pulling her wagon in Brecht's Mother Courage; and Nagg and Nell living in the ashcans of Samuel Beckett's Endgame. In the long run, the conceptual richness and precision of a play's visual presentation are far more telling than grandeur for its own sake.

Conventions To those six Aristotelian components we shall add a seventh, discrete, item that Aristotle apparently never saw reason to consider: theatrical
conventions. The agreement between audience and actor—by which the audience willingly suspends its disbelief and accepts the play as a new and temporary "reality"—entails our unthinking acceptance of a set of conventions such as "when the stage lights fade out, the play (or act) is over." Other common conventions of the Western stage over the centuries have included the following:

- When an actor turns directly away from the other actors and speaks to the audience, the other characters are presumed not to hear him. This is the convention of the aside (a line addressed directly to the audience, unheard by the other characters).
- When actors all leave the stage and then they or others reenter (particularly when the lights change), time has elapsed. And if one actor then says to another, "Welcome to Padua," we are now in Padua even if in the previous scene we were in Verona.
- When actors "freeze," we are seeing some sort of "dream state" (of one of the characters, presumably), and the words we hear are to be considered a character's thoughts, not audible speech.

We can recognize conventions most clearly in theatres unlike our own (that is probably why Aristotle, knowing no theatre but his own, never thought of defining them). In the wayang kulit shadow puppet theatre on Bali, for example, the play is over when the "tree of life" puppet, previously seen only in motion, comes to a standstill at the center of the stage. In the ancient no drama of Japan, the audience realizes that words sung by chorus members are to be considered speeches spoken by the actors who are dancing, and the audience interprets gestures with a fan to indicate wind, rain, or the rising moon. In the Chinese xiqu, or traditional opera, a character entering the bare stage while holding a boat paddle is understood to be rowing across a river, and one entering with a whip is understood to be riding a horse.

Theatrical conventions permit shorthand communication with the audience without the encumbrance of extensive physical elaboration or acting-out. If a locale can effectively be changed by the convention of a simple light shift instead of by moving a ton of scenery, the theatre saves money and the audience saves time. Thus stage violence is usually executed conventionally (that is, with little physical mayhem) rather than with lifelike (or cinematic) verisimilitude. The impossibility of realistically portraying severed torsos, rupturing intestines, or bleeding limbs onstage ordinarily outweighs any dramatic advantage in doing so; and the theatrical convention ("stab, grab, scream, collapse, and die") can be accepted fully if performed with emotional and psychological (though not physical) authenticity.

Each theatrical era sets up its own system of conventions, which the audience will accept without the slightest reflection. In modern times, playwrights and directors have deliciously exploited the theatrical conventions of the past or invented new ones. Peter Shaffer's Black Comedy, which is set in a room during a complete blackout, employs a convention that Shaffer attributes to the Chinese: when the lights are on, they are "off," and when they are off, they
are "on." Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* and Steven Berkoff's *Kwutch* give us to understand that when the actors "freeze" and speak, we in the audience—but not the other characters in the play—hear their unspoken thoughts. Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* uses a variation on the Greek device of the chorus: a single man speaks with the author's voice as the characters onstage freeze in silence. Arthur Miller's *After the Fall* places an imaginary psychiatrist in the midst of the audience, and the play's protagonist repeatedly interrupts the action of the drama to address his analyst in highly theatrical therapy sessions. And thus, there is no formal requirement for the establishment of theatrical conventions, except that audiences must "agree" to suspend disbelief and accept them. And they do.

The seven components of every play—Aristotle's six plus the conventions that frame them—are the raw material of drama. All are important. Indeed, the theatre could not afford to dispense with any of them. Some plays are intensive in one or more components; most great productions show artistry in all. The balancing of these components in theatrical presentation is one of the primary challenges facing the director, who on one or another occasion may be called upon mainly to clarify and elaborate a theme, to find the visual mode of presentation that best supports the action, to develop and flesh out the characterizations in order to give strength and meaning to the plot, to heighten a musical tone in order to enhance sensual effect, or to develop the precise convention—the relationship between play and audience—that will maximize the play's artistic impact. For as important as each of these components is to the theatrical experience, it is their combination and interaction, not their individual splendor, that is crucial to a production's success.

**Drama's Timeline: The Horizontal Axis**

The action of a dramatic performance plays out over time. The horizontal axis of dramaturgy is where we focus on *temporal structure*. Here, this term refers to much more than the events contained within the play's published (or unpublished) script. It pertains to three major groupings of a performance: *preplay*, *play*, and *postplay*. The play itself, quite properly, receives the most attention from drama scholars and theorists, but the surrounding preplay and postplay have been part of the overall theatrical experience from the theatre's earliest days and also merit attention.

**Preplay** Preplay begins with the attraction of an audience. Theatre has had this responsibility in every era, for there can be no "seeing place" (*theatron*) without seers.

The procession is one of the oldest known ways of publicizing the theatre. The circus parade, which still takes place in some of the smaller towns of Europe and the United States, is a remnant of a once-universal form of advertisement for the performing arts that probably began well in advance of recorded history. The Greeks of ancient Athens opened their great dramatic festivals with a *proagon* (literally, "pre-action"), in which both playwrights and actors were introduced at a huge public meeting and given a chance to speak about the plays they were to present on subsequent days. The Elizabethans flew flags atop their playhouses on performance days, and the flags could be seen across the Thames in "downtown" London, enticing hundreds away from their commercial and religious activities. The lighted marquees of Broadway theatres around Times Square and of London theatres in the West End are a modern-day equivalent of the flags that waved over those first great English public theatres. Today, posters, illustrated programs, multicolor subscription brochures, full-page newspaper advertisements, staged media events, articulate press releases, and, in New York, flashy television commercials summon patrons out of the comfort of their homes and into the theatre. Far from being an inconsequential aspect of theatre, publicity today occupies a place of fundamental importance in the thinking of theatrical producers, and it commands a major share of the budget for commercial theatrical ventures.

Once gathered at the theatre's door, the audience remains a collection of individuals preoccupied with their daily concerns. Now the theatre must shift their focus to the lives of dramatic characters, and transform the spectators into a community devoted to the concerns of the play. Ushers may lead them into the audience area, showing them to their seats and providing them with written programs that will prepare them for the fiction they are about to see. Preshow music or perhaps an ominously pulsing sound effect may be used to set a mood or tone, while stage lights may "warm" a curtain or illuminate the revealed stage and scenery with a romantic or eerie glow, creating the anticipation of dramatic actions about to take place. There may be some visible stage activity, such as a ticking clock or flickering carnival lights or perhaps a few actors engaged in quiet preshow activity as incoming audience members observe the scene. In
most cases there will be much to look at, but unlike moviegoers, the audience for a live theatre production will be aware of itself, because the seating area is fully illuminated and audience members are free to greet and chat with each other. As a live art, theatre's liveliness in part results from the fact that audience members are always part of the action and share their responses—laughter, sighing, and applause—with the actors as well as with one another.

Finally, a swift conclusion to the transition begins, usually with an announcement for audience members to turn off their cell phones so that the outside world will remain sealed out for the show's duration. Then the house lights dim, and (if all goes well) the audience is transported into the world of the play. In the familiar theatrical saying, "it's magic time."

Play In contrast to staged events such as performance art and stand-up comedy, a play normally contains a structured sequence of identifiable elements.

Here again, Aristotle affords some help, telling us that drama has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In his Poetics, Aristotle even proffers some details about these elements, all in the context of his first dramatic component: plot. We can elaborate on Aristotle's beginning, middle, and end somewhat, for four fairly consistent features are routinely recognized in the orderly plot sequencing of a conventionally Aristotelian dramatic experience: exposition, conflict, climax, and denouement.

The exposition No important play has ever begun with a character dashing on stage and shouting, "The house is on fire!" At best such a beginning could only confuse members of the audience, and at worst it could cause them to flee in panic. At that point they would have no way of knowing what house or why they should even care about it. Most plays, whatever their style or genre, begin with dialogue or action calculated to ease us, not shock us, into the concerns of
the characters with whom we are to spend the next two hours or so.

*Exposition* is a word not much in favor now, coming as it does from an age when play structure was considered more cut-and-dried than it is today. But it remains a useful term, referring to the background information the audience must have in order to understand what’s going on in the action of a play.

In the rather mechanical plotting of “well-made plays,” the exposition is handled with little fanfare. A few characters—often servants (minor figures in the action to follow)—discuss something that is about to happen and enlighten one another (and, of course, the audience) about certain details around which the plot will turn. Consider these lines from the opening scene of Henrik Ibsen’s 1884 classic, *The Wild Duck*:

**PETTERSEN,** in livery, and **JENSEN,** the hired waiter, in black, are putting the study in order. From the dining room, the hum of conversation and laughter is heard.

**PETTERSEN:** Listen to them, Jensen; the old man’s got to his feet—he’s giving a toast to Mrs. Sorby.

**JENSEN:** (pushing forward an armchair) Do you think it’s true, then, what they’ve been saying, that there’s something going on between them?

**PETTERSEN:** God knows.

**JENSEN:** He used to be quite the lady’s man, I understand.

**PETTERSEN:** I suppose.

**JENSEN:** And he’s giving this party in honor of his son, they say.

**PETTERSEN:** That’s right. His son came home yesterday.

**JENSEN:** I never even knew old Warle had a son.

**PETTERSEN:** Oh, he has a son all right. But he’s completely tied up at the Hoidal works. In all the years I’ve been here he’s never come into town.

**A WAITER:** (in the doorway of the other room) Pettersen, there’s an old fellow here . . .

**PETTERSEN:** (muttering) Damn. Who’d show up at this time of night?

After a few more lines, Pettersen, Jensen, and the waiter make their exits and are seen no more. Their function is purely expository—to pave the way for the principal characters. Their conversation is a contrivance intended simply to give us a framework for the action—and the information they impart is presented by means of a conversation only because a convention of realism decrees that words spoken in a play be addressed to characters, not to the audience.

In contrast, the exposition of nonrealistic plays can be handled more directly. It was the Greek custom to begin a play with a prologue preceding the entrance of the chorus and the major play episodes; the prologue was sometimes a scene and sometimes a simple speech to the audience. Shakespeare also used prologues in some of his plays. In one particularly interesting example, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the play begins with an actor identified as “Chorus” who comes onto the stage and addresses the audience directly, telling where the play is presumed to take place (the city of Verona), explaining what the theatre’s stage doors are to represent (the “two households” of the leading characters), and previewing the characters and plot:

**CHORUS:** Two households, both alike in dignity, In fair Verona, where we lay our scene, From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean. From forth the fatal loins of these two foes A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life; Whose misadventured piteous overthrows Do with their death bury their parents’ strife. The fearful passage of their death-marked love, And the continuance of their parents’ rage, Which, but their children’s end, nought could remove, Is now the two hours’ traffic of our stage; The which if you with patient ears attend, What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

By saying “our toil,” the Chorus presents himself not as a character but as a member of the acting company, reminding the audience that putting on a “play” requires “work” from the actors as well as “patient ears” from the audience. In today’s theatre, of course, some of the exposition the Chorus shares with us (normally the setting, at least) will instead be in a printed program distributed as we enter.

**The conflict** Now is the time for the character to enter shouting, “The house is on fire!” It is a truism that drama requires conflict; in fact, the word *drama*, when used in daily life, implies a situation fraught with conflict. No one writes plays about characters who live every day in unimpaired serenity; no one would ever choose to watch such a play. Conflict and confrontation are the mechanisms by which a situation becomes dramatic.

Why is this so? Why is conflict so theatrically interesting? The reasons have to do with plot, theme, and character. Plot can hold suspense only when it involves alternatives and choices: Macbeth has strong reasons to murder King Duncan and strong reasons not to. If he had only the former or only the latter, he would project no real conflict and we would not consider him such an interesting character. We are fascinated
Drama requires conflict, and Shakespeare's tragedy Othello is filled with it: between father and daughter, soldiers and officers, and, fatally, husbands and wives. In the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2009 production directed by Kathryn Hunter, Patrice Nisimbenas Othello furiously hurls Natalia Tena as Desdemona to the ground in a jealous rage as the conflict between them escalates.

by such a character's actions largely in light of the actions he rejects and the stresses he has to endure in making his decisions. In other words, plot entails not only the actions of a play but also the inactions—the things that are narrowly rejected and do not happen. A character's decision must proceed from powerfully conflicting alternatives if we are to watch this behavior with empathy instead of mere curiosity. In watching a character act, the audience must also watch the character think; a playwright gets the character to think by putting him or her into conflict.

Conflict may be set up between characters as well as within them; it may be reducible to one central situation, or it may evolve out of many. Whatever the case, conflict throws characters into relief and permits the audience to see deeply into the human personality. To see a character at war with herself or in confrontation with another is to see how that character works, and this is the key to our caring.

The theme of a play is ordinarily a simple abstraction of its central conflict. In Sophocles' Antigone, for example, the theme is the conflict between divine law and civil law; in Death of a Salesman, it is the conflict between Willy's reality and his dreams. Conflicts are plentiful in farces and comedies as well; the conflicts inherent in a "love triangle," for example, have provided comic material for dramatists for the past two millennia. Many of the more abstract philosophical conflicts—independence versus duty, individuality versus conformity, idealism versus pragmatism, integrity
versus efficiency, pleasure versus propriety, progress versus tradition, to name a few—suggest inexhaustible thematic conflicts that appear in various guises in both ancient and contemporary plays.

The playwright introduces conflict early in a play, often by means of an “inciting incident,” in which one character poses a conflict or confrontation either to another character or to himself. For example:

FIRST WITCH: All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
SECOND WITCH: All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
THIRD WITCH: All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter!
BANQUO: (to MACBETH) Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair?

In this, the inciting incident of Shakespeare’s Macbeth (which follows two brief expository scenes), a witch confronts Macbeth with the prediction that he will be king, thereby positing an alternative that Macbeth has apparently already considered, judging from the startled response that elicits Banquo’s comment.

Once established, conflict is intensified to crisis, usually by a series of incidents, investigations, revelations, and confrontations. Sometimes even non-events serve to intensify a conflict, as in the modern classic Waiting for Godot, in which two characters simply wait, through two hour-long acts, for the arrival of a third, who never comes. Indeed, with this play, Samuel Beckett practically rewrote the book on playwriting technique by showing how time alone, when properly managed, can do the job of heightening and developing conflict in a dramatic situation.

The climax Conflict cannot be intensified indefinitely. In a play, as in life, when conflict becomes insupportable, something has to give. Thus every play, be it comic, tragic, farcical, or melodramatic, culminates in some sort of dramatic explosion.

As we have seen, Aristotle described that dramatic explosion, in tragedy, as a catharsis, a cleansing or purification. Aristotle’s conception is susceptible to various interpretations, but it has been widely accepted and broadly influential for centuries. The catharsis releases the audience’s pity and thereby permits the fullest experience of tragic pleasure, washing away the terror that has been mounting steadily during the play’s tragic course. Such catharsis as accompanies Oedipus’s gouging out his own eyes as he recognizes his true self illustrates the extreme theatrical explosion of which the classical Greek tragic form is capable.

For any dramatic form, the climax is the conflict of a play taken to its most extreme; it is the moment of maximum tension. At the climax, a continuation of the conflict becomes unbearable, impossible: some sort of change is mandated. Climaxes in modern plays do not, as a rule, involve death or disfigurement (although there are exceptions: Peter Shaffer’s celebrated Equus reaches its climax with the blinding of six horses, and Edward Albee’s The Zoo Story climaxes with one character’s impaling himself on a knife held by another). However, climaxes inevitably contain elements of recognition and reversal if not of catharsis, and usually the major conflicts of a play are resolved by one or more of these elements.

The denouement The climax is followed and the play is concluded by a denouement, or resolution, in which a final action or speech or even a single word or gesture indicates that the passions aroused by the play’s action are now stilled and a new harmony or understanding has been reached. The tenor of the denouement tends to change with the times. In the American theatre of the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the sentimental and message-laden denouement was the rule: in Robert Anderson’s Tea and Sympathy, a teacher’s wife prepares to prove to a sensitive boy that he is not a homosexual; in Dore Schary’s Sunrise at Campobello, a future American president makes his way on crippled legs to a convention platform. In the current theatre—in this existential age that looks with suspicion on tidy virtues and happy endings—more ironic and ambiguous denouements prevail. The current theatre also provides less in the way of purgation than do more classical modes, perhaps because the conflicts raised by the best of contemporary drama are not amenable to wholesale relief. But a denouement still must provide at least some lucidity concerning the problems raised by the play, some vision or metaphor of a deeper and more permanent understanding. Perhaps the final lines of Waiting for Godot, although premiering in 1953, best represent the denouement of the current age:

ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?
VLADIMIR: Yes, let’s go.
They do not move.

Postplay The last staged element of a theatrical presentation is the curtain call, in which the actors bow and the audience applauds. This convention—customary in the theatre at least since the time of the Romans—plays an important but often overlooked role in the overall scope of theatrical presentation.
The curtain call is not simply a time for the actors to receive congratulations from the audience, although many actors today seem to think it is. Indeed, the actor's deeply bowed head was originally an offer for his patron—the nobleman who had paid for the performance—to lop off that head with his sword if the actor had not provided satisfaction! The curtain call remains a time in which the actors show their respect for the audience that patronizes them. And aesthetically, it is a time in which the audience allows itself to see the other side of the "paradox of the actor." The curtain call liberates the audience from the world of the play. Indeed, when there is no curtain call, audiences are often disgruntled, for this convention fulfills the last provision, so to speak, in the mutual agreement that characterizes the theatre itself: the agreement by which the audience agrees to view the actors as the characters the actors have agreed to impersonate. It is at the curtain call that actors and audience can acknowledge their mutual belonging in the human society, can look each other in the eye and say, in effect, "We all know what it is to experience these things we've just seen performed. We must all try to understand life a little better. We are with you."

In the best theatre, this communication is a powerful experience—and it becomes even more powerful when the entire audience leaps to its collective feet in a standing ovation. Such a response becomes a sort of audience participation for the audience, who physically express their enthusiasm not only to the performers but also to fellow audience members standing and cheering around them.

What follows the curtain call? The audience disperses, of course, but the individual audience members do not die. Through them the production enjoys an extended afterlife—both in talk and in print—in late-night postmortems at the theatre bar, in probing conversations and published reviews over the next few days, and sometimes in formal classroom discussions, television talk shows, letters to the editor in the local newspaper, and scholarly articles and books seen weeks, months, or years later. Indeed, in a theatre devoted to community interaction, such as Los Angeles's Cornerstone (see the chapter titled "Theatre Today"), the end of the play is the beginning of a hoped-for new life of political change. For the theatre is a place of public stimulation, both intellectual and emotional, and it should be expected that the stimulation provided by a provocative production would generate both animated discussions and illuminating commentaries.

Both of these we may call dramatic criticism, which is the audience's contribution to the theatre. Criticism is as ancient as Aristotle and as contemporary as the essays and lectures that are presented daily in newspapers, journals, books, and academies all over the world. But criticism is not solely an expert enterprise; criticism—which combines analysis and evaluation—is everybody's job. We look further at this key aspect of the theatre's art in the final chapter of the book.