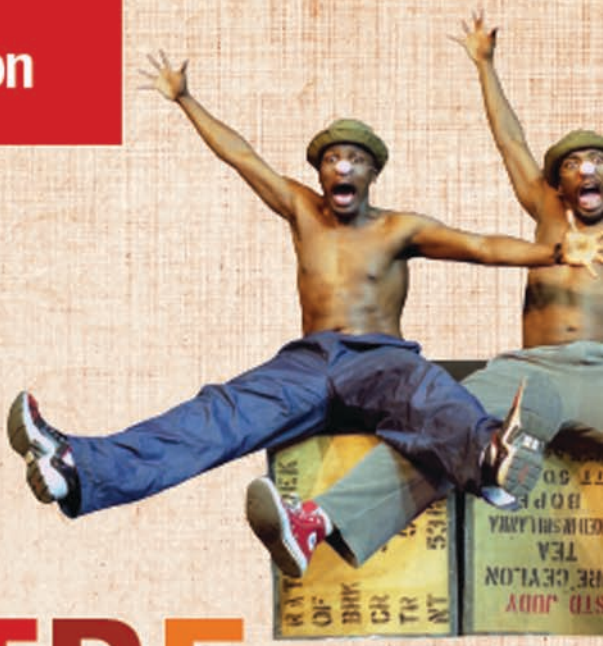
Third Edition



THEATRE HISTORIES

AN INTRODUCTION

General Editor: Tobin Nellhaus

Bruce McConachie
Tobin Nellhaus
Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei
and Tamara Underiner

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ROUTLEDGE

Theatre Histories

This thoroughly revised and updated third edition of the innovative and widely acclaimed *Theatre Histories: An Introduction* offers a critical overview of global theatre and drama, spanning a broad wealth of world cultures and periods. Bringing together a group of scholars from a diverse range of backgrounds to add fresh perspectives on the history of global theatre, the book illustrates historiographical theories with case studies demonstrating various methods and interpretive approaches.

Subtly restructured sections place the chapters within new thematic contexts to offer a clear overview of each period, while a revised chapter structure offers accessibility for students and instructors. Further new features and key updates to this third edition include:

- A dedicated chapter on historiography
- New, up-to-date, case studies
- Enhanced and reworked historical, cultural, and political timelines, helping students to place each chapter within the historical context of the section
- Pronunciation guidance, both in the text and as an online audio guide, to aid the reader in accessing and internalizing unfamiliar terminology
- A new and updated companion website with further insights, activities and resources to enable students to further their knowledge and understanding of the theatre.

Tobin Nellhaus is an independent scholar and former Librarian for Performing Arts, Media and Philosophy at Yale University. He writes mainly on the relationship between theatre and communication practices, and on critical realism in theatre historiography.

Bruce McConachie is Chair of Theatre Arts at the University of Pittsburgh, where he also directs and performs. He has published widely in American theatre history, theatre historiography, and performance and cognitive studies, and is a former President of the American Society for Theatre Research.

Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei is Professor Emerita of Theatre and Performance Studies and former Vice Chair for Graduate Programs at UCLA and former Research Fellow in the Institute for Theatre Studies at Berlin's Free University. She is a scholar, translator, playwright, and director focusing on Japanese and cross-cultural theatre.

Tamara Underiner is Associate Dean for Research for the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University, and director of the Ph.D. program in Theatre and Performance of the Americas.

Praise for this edition:

"When the first edition of *Theatre Histories* appeared in 2006 it set a new standard in the field for breadth of geographical coverage, for exploring the inter-relation of theatre with social and cultural history, and for its in-depth presentation of historical methodology. The new third edition further excels in all of these areas as well as being tied to an excellent online supplement."

Marvin Carlson, Distinguished Professor, *City University of New York*

"The third edition is a bold reworking of an already revolutionary text. The major restructuring of the chapters, case studies, and theoretical frames give the text laser clarity and make it easier to integrate into the curriculum. The diverse range of case studies makes this text deeply engaging. The authors of this volume present us yet again with a brilliant and provocative examination of the study of theatre history with its ambitious range and innovative critique of the historical narrative. Through *Theatre Histories*, the third edition, McConachie, Nellhaus, Sorgenfrei, and Underiner strike that rare balance, simultaneously teaching the historical meta-narrative while interrogating and subverting the concept of metanarratives. The book provides a dynamic platform for students and instructors alike to engage thoughtfully with the history of the theatre."

E.J. Westlake, Associate Professor of Theatre and English, *University of Michigan*

Praise for previous editions of Theatre Histories: An Introduction

"This book will significantly change theatre education."

Janelle Reinelt, *University of Warwick, formerly University of California, Irvine*

"A work that more than any other currently available suggests the range and richness of theatre and performance history study today."

Marvin Carlson, *City University of New York*

"An extraordinary undertaking . . . From the start *Theatre Histories* challenges us to think about the construction and framing of theatre history, and the intellectual assumptions and models which we bring to the analysis and interpretation of its primary materials."

Katherine Newey, *University of Birmingham*, in Theatre Research International

"Globally ambitious in its scope, innovative in design, and open-ended in its challenge to the received histories, this new grand narrative will engage scholars and students at every level, whatever their particular interests in past performance."

Jacky Bratton, *Royal Holloway, University of London*

Theatre Histories: An Introduction

Third Edition

General Editor: Tobin Nellhaus

Bruce McConachie, Tobin Nellhaus, Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei and Tamara Underiner

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About the authors

Bruce McConachie is Professor and Director of Graduate Students at the University of Pittsburgh, where he also directs and performs. He has published widely in U.S. theatre history, theatre historiography, and performance and cognitive studies. Some of his major books include *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, with Thomas Postlewait (University of Iowa Press, 1989); *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre and Society, 1820–1870* (University of Iowa Press, 1992, awarded the Barnard Hewitt Prize in Theatre History); *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War* (University of Iowa Press, 2003); *Performance and Cognition*, with F. Elizabeth Hart (Routledge, 2006); *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and *Evolution, Cognition, and Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). Professor McConachie is also a co-editor of the Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance series for Palgrave Macmillan and a former President of the American Society for Theatre Research.

Tobin Nellhaus is an independent scholar and former Librarian for Performing Arts, Media and Philosophy at Yale University. He has published mainly on the relationship between theatre and communication practices, and on critical realism in theatre historiography. He is the author of *Theater, Communication, Critical Realism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and co-editor (with Susan Haedicke) of *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance* (University of Michigan Press, 2001). His articles have appeared in *Theatre Journal*, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *Journal of Critical Realism*, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, the collections *Performance and Cognition* (ed. Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth Hart, Routledge, 2006) and *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy* (ed. David Krasner and David Z. Saltz, University of Michigan Press, 2006), and elsewhere. He was a Fulbright fellow at the University of Helsinki, and received a fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies.

Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei is Professor Emerita of Theatre at UCLA and was recently a Fellow at the Institute for Theatre Studies' International Research Center on Interweaving Performance Cultures at Berlin's Freie Universität. In 2014, she was honored by the Association for Asian Performance as one of the Founding Mothers of Asian Theatre Studies. She is the author of *Unspeakable Acts: The Avant-Garde Theatre of Terayama Shūji and Postwar Japan* (University of Hawaii Press, 2005), translations from Japanese, and many articles and essays on Japanese and intercultural performance. Her sixteen original plays include the award-winning *Medea: A Noh Cycle Based on the Greek Myth*, the *kabuki*-flamenco *Blood Wine, Blood Wedding*, and (with director Zvika Serper) the Japanese-Israeli fusion *The Dybbuk: Between Two Worlds*. Her newest play *Ghost Light: The Haunting* (with director Penny Bergman) fuses the *kabuki Yotsuya Kaidan* and *Macbeth*. She is Associate Editor of *Asian Theatre Journal* and Editor of the *Newsletter of the Association for Asian Performance*.

Tamara Underiner is Associate Dean for Research for the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University, and Associate Professor in the School of Film, Dance and Theatre, where she directs the Ph.D. program in Theatre and Performance of the Americas. She is the author of *Contemporary Theatre in Mayan Mexico: Death-Defying Acts* (University of Texas Press, 2004), and has published on indigenous and Latina/o theatre and critical pedagogy in *Theatre Journal*, *Signs*, *Baylor Journal of Theatre and Performance*, *TDR*, and critical anthologies from academic presses in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. She is active in the American Society for Theatre Research, the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, and the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics.

Preface to the third edition

The third edition of *Theatre Histories* constitutes a major revision. Our overarching aims for the book are the same, including global coverage, case studies on particular developments or issues in theatre history, discussions of historiographical approaches, and a focus on communication practices. For this edition, however, we sought four particular goals that proved transformative: to address the connections between communication and theatre more sharply; to reexamine the narratives or themes of each chapter; to rebalance the amount of discussion on some topics; and to keep the book at roughly the same length to control costs.

As a result, material has been extensively reorganized and re-thought. The chapters of this edition seldom match those of the second – most of them differ in their chronological coverage and sometimes their themes. The material in the second edition's lengthy Part introductions has moved into regular chapters, and each Part now has a brief introduction which establishes overall contexts and keynotes. Similarly, we decided that instead of a chapter on popular entertainment, we would distribute those topics among other chapters. The second edition's Preface, which addressed some of the functions of a book introduction, has been replaced with a fuller General Introduction that explains several central issues in historiography and orients students to the book's goals, focus, and structure. To accommodate expanded discussion of some topics, material that we felt was useful but no longer central was transferred to the website, to keep it available to instructors. The substantial percentage of the book that was absorbed by bibliographies has been much reduced, to allow more space for the chapters: we include the media resources and the works actually cited within the book, and we list other consulted works on the *Theatre Histories* website.

We reshaped Part I of *Theatre Histories* most substantially. Topics that were in three different chapters now appear in one, and coverage of ritual has been greatly reduced. There were several reasons for these changes. We wanted to move to discussions of theatre sooner, and in the process, sharpen the focus on how theatre is affected by changes in communication. In addition, although the material on ritual was meant to illuminate the sorts of performance

appearing in oral cultures, due to its quantity it seemed to offer inadvertent support for the now much-doubted theory that ritual (or alternatively, religion) is theatre's origin. However, instructors who want to address ritual and the development of language in more detail will find those discussions on the website.

The apparent quieting of the "theory wars" within theatre studies and our desire to give instructors more flexibility when addressing topics in theatre history led us to loosen the relationship between case studies and theoretical approaches. In this edition, some case studies introduce a specific approach, but others do not. Likewise, some of what we previously called "Interpretive approaches" are now independent of a case study; but between expanding the range of topics that the "Interpretive approaches" sections could encompass, and realizing that the phrase "interpretive approaches" could be misconstrued as meaning the analysis of theatre history consists merely of opinions, we decided to rename those segments "Thinking through theatre histories." They now discuss not only historiographical methods and perspectives, but also narrative strategies and particular historiographical problems. Readers may notice that there is no section explicitly on feminist approaches (of which, of course, there are many). However, women's activities and gender issues (including feminist and queer theory) are addressed throughout the text and in some of the case studies.

The third edition provides several new case studies; we moved others to the website (corrected as needed) so instructors who want to use them can do so. In several instances, the new edition has a condensed version of a case study and we have put the full version on the website. In the course of *Theatre Histories*' revisions and online resource development, we aim to build a repertory of case studies and other materials which instructors can select in order to shape their courses in a manner that is both flexible yet consistent with the overall approach taken in this book.

Readers of *Theatre Histories*' first and second editions will notice a different roster of authors for the third. Such turnover was intended from the book's beginnings. Gary Jay Williams and Phillip B. Zarrilli took the opportunity to step down; Tobin Nellhaus and Tamara Underiner came on board. The new team adopted two connected goals for our revision process: more collaboration and greater coordination. Toward the former, we took numerous steps. All of the authors had a voice in major content and organizational decisions. Rather than have a single author take sole responsibility for one of the book's Parts, each author was assigned chapters in at least two Parts. Nearly every chapter became the product of combined authorship, bringing new perspectives throughout. The contributors are shown in each chapter's byline. And once all of the chapters were near their final form, we all read and commented on each other's work. To provide unity within this extensive collaboration, we established the role of General Editor.

In the midst of our collaboration, however, we of course have our individual outlooks. We agree on the main principles of theatre historiography, but we have differing views on how to weigh the many factors that shape theatre at any particular time, and we have our own interests within theatre history. We believe that these differences in themselves help this book achieve its goals. Thus the plural in "theatre histories" refers to several things: the multiplicity of performance practices in the world, both geographically and chronologically; the diversity of theories, facets, emphases, and goals in theatre historiography; and the mix of perspectives and personalities that contributed to the making of *Theatre Histories*' third edition.

All of us, however, owe a deep debt of gratitude to the authors who are no longer involved in the book. Specifically, Phillip B. Zarrilli's contributions are embedded in Chapters 1–4 and

12, and work by Gary Jay Williams appears in Chapters 6–9 and 12–15. In addition, both of them wrote materials in the previous editions that are now available on the website. Readers will continue to hear their voices in this new edition of *Theatre Histories*.

Bruce McConachie
Tobin Nellhaus
Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei
Tamara Underiner

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Acknowledgments

The authors want to express again our gratitude to Routledge's Talia Rodgers, Publisher, for her belief in and long support of this project, from conception through this third edition. Talia's support of this new approach to creating a theatre history text has been an act of faith. We also want to thank Suzanne Richardson, Development Editor, who assisted us through the numerous complexities of producing this new edition, and the rest of Routledge's textbook production staff.

A history of this scope is possible in great part, of course, because of the specialized works of many dedicated scholars. We are indebted to them; we have drawn on them often and happily. Their works are cited in this text and in the extended bibliographies on our website.

Many of our colleagues have been especially supportive. We especially wish to thank for their advice and encouragement Jay Ball, Daniel Banks, Jason Bush, Claire Conceison, Dave Escoffery, Faye C. Fei, Lance Gharavi, Richard Hornby, David Jortner, Margaret Knapp, Marianne McDonald, David Mayer, Paul Murphy, Stuart Sillars, Julia Walker, Andrew Weintraub, E.J. Westlake, Gary Jay Williams, S.E. Wilmer, W.B. Worthen, and Jiayun Zhuang. Simon Williams was initially involved in this project and provided valuable contributions at an early stage. We have listened to and benefited from the external reviewers of our work, including our critics; they have helped us serve our readers better. We look forward to future conversations with our readers.

We are grateful to our students, who have been there at every stage of the journey, helping to shape what we think is a necessary new step for thinking about theatre and performance history. We have each benefited also from the long-term research support of our universities: the University of Exeter, the University of Wisconsin – Madison, the University of Pittsburgh, the Catholic University of America – Washington, DC, the University of California – Los Angeles, and Arizona State University.

We have also had the strong, enduring support of families and partners. Their considerable sacrifices made it possible for the work to get done, and we express our heartfelt thanks to all of them, including Gerry Magallan, Stephanie McConachie, and Richard Hornby.

Routledge would like to thank all those archives and individuals who have given permission to reproduce images in this textbook. In a few rare cases, we were unable, despite the utmost efforts, to locate owners of materials. For this we apologize and will make any corrections in the next reprint if contacted.

Bruce McConachie
Tobin Nellhaus
Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei
Tamara Underiner

General introduction

Tobin Nellhaus

The goals of *Theatre Histories*

Theatre Histories aims to introduce the history – or as we will explain, histories – of theatre, drama, and performance. The meaning of that sentence may seem obvious: the book presents information about people, plays, and performance practices such as acting, costumes, and staging. But we also have two other goals. One is to consider theatre's relationships with some of its many social contexts. The other is to raise questions about the meaning of evidence and events, and discuss different ways of interpreting them. Raising such questions often entails "unpacking" facts and statements because they contain more (or perhaps less!) than meets the eye.

For example, as the first sentence of this introduction shows, we will often use two or three terms, sometimes in combination, to describe our focus: "theatre," "drama," and "performance." The three terms overlap each other, but one can distinguish them reasonably clearly.

"Drama" is generally used to describe plays, collectively or in the singular. Occasionally it's used more broadly in order to refer to *what* is performed (fictional characters and actions, even if based on historical people and events), as distinct from *how* it is performed; the drama might not be a script at all, just ideas and character types in the performers' minds. For some people, "drama" carries the narrower sense of plays as literary works, printed texts to be read as "dramatic literature," apart from performance; however, for the authors of this book, the connection to performance is essential.

By "theatre" we usually mean live performances by skilled artists for live audiences, usually of drama or something drama-like. Such performances engage the spectators' imagination, emotion, intellect, and cultural perspectives, at varying levels. They may or may not take place in buildings built specifically for theatrical performance. Sometimes the audience members are also the performers. In theatre, everyone involved is aware that the performance presents a fiction. True, occasionally people use "theatre" to describe performances which attempt to lead observers into thinking that what they are watching is not fictional, or situations in which

spectators observe other people as though (unbeknownst to them) they are fictional characters; but for the purposes of this book, these cases apply the term "theatre" metaphorically.

The term "performance" generally refers to embodied presentation on stage (or with surrogates for the body, such as puppets). However, the term has a special meaning today in the field of performance studies to include *all* the ways in which humans represent themselves in embodied ways. Scholars apply that sense of "performance" not only to the staging of plays but also to religious rituals, state ceremonies, carnivals, political demonstrations, athletic contests, the customs of a family dinner table, the ways people portray themselves in social media, and many other activities. In that sense, theatre is but one of many kinds of performance.

Occasionally *Theatre Histories* employs this broader sense of "performance." We think it is natural and enlightening to make connections between theatre and other types of performance. For that reason, even though *Theatre Histories* is not a performance studies textbook, we consider a wide range of performances – from Japanese puppetry to productions of plays by Samuel Beckett, from the dance-dramas of India to early twentieth-century high-fashion musical revues, and from ancient Greek drama to the Hip Hop plays created globally. We believe the juxtapositions among these will attune the reader to appreciate better the wide spectrum of theatre and performance in many cultures.

The scope of "theatre history" in *Theatre Histories* must also be unpacked. Knowing about theatre globally is vital today. For example, it is not unusual for playwrights, directors, and designers to be inspired by the theatre of other cultures (possibly ancient ones), and sometimes actors are expected to know or quickly absorb foreign acting methods. In addition, cultures today are constantly crossing national borders and influencing each other, such as the importation of K-Pop music and Bollywood movies into Western countries, or the performance of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in China and the adoption of rap music across the planet. For those reasons we strive to provide an understanding of theatrical performance around the world, throughout its known existence. We also believe that isolating the study of Western from non-Western theatre does not serve students well. For that reason, most chapters in *Theatre Histories* include theatre from various parts of the world, with a few exceptions where thematic or other reasons made it unfeasible.

In our view, the history of theatre involves more than actors, performance spaces, plays, and staging. Theatrical performances occur within society. Thus *Theatre Histories* often discusses political, cultural, economic, and other social issues, and how they affected theatre, drama, and performance. The relationships among these various social dynamics, and between them and theatre, are extremely complex. However, *Theatre Histories* will pay one element special attention: a society's communication practices (its uses of speech, handwriting, printing, and electronics). We discuss this focus in more detail below.

Writing theatre history involves more than accumulating facts. Historians have to make decisions about what information is most important, and develop an understanding of how events are related. In other words, the process of writing about history – **historiography** – always involves interpretations of the past. One of the goals of *Theatre Histories* is to provide not just information about theatre, and not just our own interpretations of that information, but also an understanding of how interpretations come into being – how history is written – in order to enable students to evaluate historical writing. The remainder of this introduction surveys some of the core issues in historiography, the approach adopted by the authors, and its influence on our discussions and even the organization of the book.

Historiography: Thinking about history

If historiography involves interpreting the past, then we need to consider what it means to "interpret." One view frequently encountered today is that any claim that "X is true" is really "just an interpretation" – a complete matter of opinion. According to this perspective, there is no way to choose between them: all opinions are equally valid, and whatever is "true for me" is inherently unassailable.

As a general theory, this notion doesn't stand up to analysis, since it is logically self-defeating (the idea that every claim is merely an opinion must itself be merely an opinion), and it cannot account for actual practice. Nobody has ever actually stopped gravity by not believing in it; Western science hasn't explained (in its own terms) how the Asian medical technique of acupuncture works, but it has generally accepted that acupuncture can successfully treat pain and nausea. Beliefs about these things do not alter their efficacy. In addition, although many of those professing this theory intend well by trying not to impose their views on others, they open the door wide for arguments that are incorrect, misinforming, and/or malignant. The denial that during the Second World War the Nazi's extermination programs murdered 11 million people – Jews and non-Jews – is not an "equally valid opinion," it is a falsehood.

Nevertheless, the notion that every claim is "just an opinion" does sound a useful cautionary note for historiography, because interpretation is a necessary part of it. Determining exactly what, how, and why things happened is often extraordinarily difficult or even impossible; frequently evidence is fragmentary and ambiguous; and innumerable events are always happening simultaneously. One cannot perform experiments on history, and it is difficult to perceive one's own mistaken assumptions about the meaning of historical evidence. Although history is often imagined (and occasionally taught) as a simple, plodding path of dry facts, people experience history as a realm of fierce argument. We know what happened in history, until we realize we don't or we discover that someone else knows it differently. Even at the personal level, when talking with someone about a shared event, we all encounter moments when we say: "I don't remember it that way!" There clearly are facts, but even if we agree on them, we can fit them together in different ways, bringing out different perspectives, illuminating different connections, or formulating different explanations. To give one example of the role of perspective in historiography, the U.S. view of the American Revolutionary War is often that the British government was increasingly imposing itself on local governance, and demanded oppressive taxes to pay for the French and Indian War (1756–63, also called the Seven Years' War) in which many colonists had lost their lives; in contrast, to the British Parliament the Americans were ingrates refusing to pay their fair share for a war that had secured the colonies' very existence, and the Parliament's deliberations on managing the rebellion were based on assumptions drawn from prior (but inapplicable) experience, leading to serious miscalculations. Interpretation is intrinsic to historiography, and our understanding of history is necessarily always open to revision.

Social context and cultural relativity

A theatre historian could try to evade the problem of interpretation by writing a history that simply looks at what happens within theatrical practice: the eighteenth-century *kabuki* stage had such-and-such shape and size, during the late sixteenth century Isabella Andreini was an important *commedia dell'arte* actor in Italy and Christopher Marlowe was a major English playwright, the philosophy espoused by Auguste Comte shaped nineteenth-century realist

theatre in Europe, and so forth. A theatre history like that would present no particular reason for theatre's changes or for the direction of change, such as why X was influential instead of Y. What happens in the society at large (such as economic transformations, religious conflicts, new ideas, and political rivalries) might be mentioned as the "larger context," but the larger context has little real bearing on theatre practices – it explains little and stays "outside the building."

Few theatre scholars today would accept such an approach to theatre history. In fact it could never achieve its goal, because the idea that theatre can be divorced from its social context is itself an interpretation. *Theatre Histories* is particularly emphatic that what happens inside the theatre is deeply connected to what happens outside, not just as a matter of the topics playwrights present on stage, but also how plays are performed, who performs them, who attends them, and what social developments produced changes in cultural ideas that were manifested in stylistic shifts. For instance, approaches to acting can be rooted in scientific developments; the sorts of characters one sees in a play can be connected to the way people use the printing press; whether plays are written at all (rather than improvised or orally transmitted) may be the result of the society's political and economic configuration. The theatre's doors are always open to the world, and the world always enters. In fact the world is already part of theatre itself.

Just as theatre is thoroughly embedded in society, perspectives on history and society are often connected to particular cultures and their values. We can see how ideas can be relative to a specific society in an example drawn from theatre history. In Europe during the Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance, people believed there was a hierarchy among all things in the world, starting with rocks at the bottom and rising through plants, animals, humans, angels, and ultimately God. Humans themselves were ranked from the lowliest beggars, up through serfs, knights, earls, dukes, and finally the king. (Actors, incidentally, were lumped with prostitutes.) All told, this vertical understanding of the world was called the Great Chain of Being, and people acted on that understanding by (for instance) passing laws regarding what clothes people could wear. But in the late seventeenth century another view began to emerge, which slowly consolidated into a more horizontal concept of society expressed in statements such as "All men are created equal," and people acted on that belief (at least to some extent) by establishing nations with democracies.

Such vertical and horizontal concepts are evident in theatre architecture. In the early 1600s, theatre buildings in Europe usually allowed only one person, such as the king or duke, to have a perfect view of the perspective scenery; everyone else's view was fragmented and distorted. In the late 1800s a new building design gave everyone a more equal view of the stage. Is either the vertical or the horizontal concept of society "true"? Most historians today would answer that each view is "valid" – acceptable – within some societies, but neither one is valid for all societies: their validity is culturally relative.

The point is important because historians can unwittingly project their own perceptions, assumptions, and beliefs (which may seem like common sense in their own culture) on to earlier and foreign societies, leading to severe misunderstandings. For instance, scholars may believe that religion involves the same type of concepts in other cultures as it does in their own, not realizing that there can be significant differences. There is also a long, unpleasant history of historians projecting their ideas and values in a way that implies (or states outright) that their own society is superior to others. We will discuss examples of this practice at several points in *Theatre Histories*.

For certain purposes, however, historians apply their perspective intentionally and for good reasons, particularly when they pursue questions such as "Who gains?" and "Who is harmed?" These concerns frequently arise in analyses of economics, gender, race, and politics. Capitalism is one such topic often discussed in terms of gain and harm. Some people argue that capitalism is good because competition and the search for profit have led to innumerable innovations that have benefited people around the globe, and allow individuals to improve their economic standing. Others hold that capitalism is bad because it makes working people dependent on companies and corporations that prioritize profit over people's needs, and because the system suffers drastic cycles which can suddenly throw millions of people into poverty. Still others believe that capitalism doesn't exist: there are only free markets in which employers and employees are on a level playing field and meet to conduct a fair exchange of labor for payment, so the entire question is moot. Each perspective leads to different ways of writing history, as does an approach that seeks to "balance" the pros and cons rather than say that one side outweighs the other. (Notice that one can ask not only whether these claims are true, but also who benefits or is harmed by the claim itself!) Questions of gain and harm also arise in theatre history: for instance, as we will see, in the past many cultures allowed only men to perform in plays, which historians deemed insignificant until some argued that the practice was misogynistic, and others that it was homoerotic. (Its treatment as insignificant is itself often considered misogynistic.) Further interpretations emerged in response. Such debates force scholars to reexamine evidence and their own attitudes, and they have deepened our insight into theatre's complexity.

Clearly, however, there is tension between the desire to avoid projecting our own society's views on to others, and the desire to criticize inequality. There may be no completely satisfactory solution to that tension. In *Theatre Histories* our goal is to introduce both, since both bring much of value (and important values) to theatre history. We present some examples of historical critique. At the same time we also strive to consider what performances meant to their original audience; we recognize, however, that we can seldom be certain that we've succeeded – the people of third-century India, for instance, aren't around to tell us whether we got things right, and their judgments would be colored by their own perspectives.

Evidence–theory connections

Evidence, then, is often subject to interpretation due to the historian's assumptions, values, and informational contexts. A historian's social position, need to justify one side's actions, and sometimes even wishful thinking can also surreptitiously slip into historiography. One topic where historians' projections have strongly influenced their interpretations is the question of theatre's origins, especially in ancient Greece. In the early 1900s, Gilbert Murray and other classical anthropologists contended that Greek tragedy evolved from religious rituals. The hypothesis was surrounded by just enough apparent evidence to be taken as proved.

By the late 1920s, however, classicists showed that the logic behind Murray's theory was flawed, much of the evidence it presented was misconstrued, and contrary evidence had not been considered. The problems with Murray's thesis are so acute that the classical scholar Gerald Else asserted that Murray had not accumulated evidence which he then realized could be explained by the "ritual origins" theory, but instead was driven by "the determination at all costs to find the origin of tragedy in religion, and therefore in ritual" (1965: 4) – in other words, that Murray selected and interpreted his evidence in order to fit the theory he already had in mind.

Although ancient Greek theatre may have had some sort of relationship to ritual, it was not the evolutionary one that Murray proposed. But the "religious ritual origins" theory captured many people's imagination, and still appears in one form or another to this day, including among some classicists. (Some writers dub refuted yet tenacious theories "zombie ideas.") One reason it persists is that some theatre practitioners and scholars feel that the theory offers an inspiration for vitality in performance and a way to comprehend that vitality. Inspiration is always "true" in the sense that a lived experience cannot be falsified (if you feel excited, I can't demonstrate that you're actually bored), and in a sense, the inspiration is more valid if one believes that the theory of "religious ritual origins" is correct. In other words, if an inspiration is true then its source must be as well. For these practitioners and scholars, theatre's factual origin is not the most important truth: its "origin" as a belief or subjective experience is. (Note, however, that rejecting ritual as the *origin* of theatre does not exclude other possible relationships between them.)

In this example we see that there can be different perspectives on "what actually happened," but these different perspectives are not equally valid, nor are they impervious to criticism. We can also see that for some people there are different "kinds" of truth (a position that itself can be interpreted in various ways), and that not everyone thinks the different kinds have the same level of importance; for others, there is only one kind of truth. We will return to the question of theatre's origins in Chapter 1.

In contrast, a historian may make an argument based on both strong argument and solid evidence . . . and then the evidence changes. In one case of "facts" changing, the first known theatre building – the Theatre of Dionysus, in Athens, Greece – was long thought to seat 15,000–17,000 people; but in light of recent archaeological evidence, classical scholars now believe the theatre's initial capacity was closer to 3,700–6,000 spectators, and the larger figure refers to a later expansion (Roselli 2011: 64–5). As a result of this change in the evidence, an excellent theory about the role of theatre in ancient Athens based on the previous estimate might need to be revised or even rejected. People may discover that a piece of evidence about theatre is more recent than was thought, or that the evidence believed to demonstrate something true everywhere actually pertains only to one city, or that evidence was misinterpreted, or that other pieces of evidence must be considered, or that a facet of theatre (say, the significance of the actors' gender) was left out of the picture entirely, or that the source isn't reliable.

Although historians usually strive to avoid forcing evidence into a predetermined theory, or at least to be aware that there may be contrary evidence, historical evidence is always sought, chosen, and interpreted. Evidence doesn't "speak for itself," the historian makes it speak to us. Because historians must select and interpret, they can misunderstand or misrepresent historical events; but by the same token, new interpretations can reveal aspects of history that weren't recognized before – "historical discoveries" may arise by understanding preexisting evidence in innovative ways. In either case, whether one thinks the selection and description of evidence is a problem or an advantage, it is a necessary part of historiography, and the condition under which writing history must occur.

Intelligibility, plausibility, and narrative

Historians do more than select and interpret evidence: they also organize the evidence in order to create an intelligible (and, they hope, persuasive) narrative. Chronological order is generally part of making history plausible, especially when the causes of change are central, although in

practice much historical writing must go back and forth in time in order to pick up various threads of a complex story. Historians also make events understandable by casting them in a particular light or giving their narrative a particular tone. For example, a historian might highlight historical ironies, such as the way President George W. Bush once criticized "nation building," in which the U.S. rebuilds a country's economic and political structure when its government fails; but later, as a consequence of launching a war in Iraq, Bush had to attempt exactly that. Historians can also romanticize events, as did those who described John F. Kennedy's term as President as "Camelot," alluding to a Broadway musical about the gallant King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Similarly, one historian may view a certain chain of events as improvement, while another may perceive it as a decline. These are just a few of the ways historians may make narrative sense of history.

Of course, although historians strive to present a plausible narrative, "plausible" is not a synonym for "true." To take just one of the many complexities, discussions about historical causes can run into a logical problem that's often hard to detect. Imagine that the President of the United States made a speech about the stock market, and later that day the stock market indexes fell. It's easy to infer that the President's speech worried stock traders and led to the sell-off. But even though that interpretation is very plausible, it might not be correct: the traders might have actually been reacting to bad news coming from abroad. One would need additional evidence to show what really caused the market decline. (This error, in which one thinks that one event must have caused another event because it preceded the second, is called a *post hoc* argument, short for the Latin *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, translated as "after this, therefore because of this.") To avoid such mistakes, historians have to think carefully about what evidence is required to support their analysis – and sometimes no further evidence is available, or at least known to the historian. Plausibility may be the best we can get. This is yet another reason why history is often subject to debate.

Causes of historical change

Narrative is intrinsic to any discussion of how and why societies change. True, to some observers societies don't fundamentally change at all: "the more things change, the more they stay the same." A less cynical and more truly historiographical view is that social changes operate in regular cycles such as rise and fall. A related idea is that social change consists of swings of a pendulum (say, between permissiveness and conformism). In contrast, sometimes history is depicted as consistent progress toward some definite goal, at times perhaps delayed but ultimately inexorable – the "march of reason," for instance.

A problem facing all of these views is that they don't provide any reason why there would be cycles, pendulum swings, or progress, or why they should apply to the particular matter of interest: these things just happen on their own, guided by an invisible hand. One answer to this question is that there is no "why," or even things like cycles and progress. Instead, history is a matter of happenstance, contingency, and accident, without any particular direction or pattern: the only agent of change lies in personal interactions. And certainly at the micro level, little more than chance may explain why one person became a historical figure rather than another. But this view misses the "big picture" of historical developments. For instance, it is striking that during roughly 1550–1650, there were substantial changes in theatrical practices throughout Europe, not always in synchrony but in the same basic direction. Performance spaces increasingly moved indoors and used more realistic scenery; characters became more

psychologically driven. What drove this "change in taste"? Why had large numbers of people come to prefer it? How and why had the concept of "realistic" changed? Surely more than coincidence or personal influence was involved.

Those questions raise others. If there were large forces behind cultural changes, one must ask what those forces were, or which of many forces was the most important. Various answers have been proposed, most of them boiling down to three kinds. One kind points to material activities, for example the production and exchange of goods and services (economics), relationships between and among women and men (the sex/gender system), technological developments, or the methods of communication. Another answer focuses on institutions, such as political systems, religious organizations, or family structures. The third view assigns primacy to ideas – theology, philosophy, science, or other sorts of worldview. One can of course also see the three factors as interacting, although in the end, usually one has the greatest weight. Earlier we explained how the Great Chain of Being was supplanted by a more horizontal concept of the world, an example of idea-driven history; but a historian might then ask what caused that change in ideas, and point to some material activity. Historians' views of the main type of force that drives society, as well as the specific force they consider, lead to very different historical narratives.

Theories of society

A key element of historians' interpretations and narratives is their general concept of how individuals and society are related. Their concept may be difficult to detect, since it is seldom explicit (even to the historian) and sometimes several different concepts seem to be invoked. As we will see, a particular concept of society directly shaped *Theatre Histories*. Understanding these different theories helps explain some of this book's organization and themes.

Sociologist Margaret S. Archer (1995) identifies four basic concepts of the relationship between individuals and society. One is that society boils down to individuals. Nothing happens in a society unless individuals do things; further, on this view the most important things about individuals – their personal traits, abilities, experiences, and achievements – are independent of any social context. According to this view, known as "methodological individualism," talk about social groups, institutions, power relationships, and society as a whole is problematic or erroneous because such things cannot be perceived: all that can be perceived are individuals' behaviors. "Social relationships" are simply interactions between individuals – family ties, buying and selling, being someone's boss, and the like. But racism, economic systems, and political power are abstractions about things that individuals do, nothing more. History is essentially about individuals: "great men (and a few great women)."

Methodological individualism breaks down when one realizes that much of what describes individuals is determined by society, such as economic class, race, age group ("generation"), citizenship, language, and so forth, and these things regulate what people do (or may do). One example is that laws, institutions and/or customs establish whether two people are married, unmarried, or not permitted to marry. Even personal interactions involve social frameworks: to understand, say, what happens between a store clerk and a customer, you need to know what "shopping," "store clerks," "customers," and "money" are, all of which require a concept of society as a whole.

The second theory of society acknowledges this by focusing on the rules and systems that govern social activities, continue a society's existence, and keep it functioning as smoothly as

possible (and so one version of this theory is called "functionalism"). The rules and systems are embodied in systems such as a society's larger political and economic structures, and people just follow their roles within them. People don't have to be conscious that they're maintaining social structures: it happens by default, in the same way that speaking English keeps the English language alive. Individuals and their activities are determined by their position within the social systems that they're part of.

The first theory suggests that individuals live in virtually unfettered freedom and are wholly responsible for their personal fates, as if larger social conditions don't exist or have no power to limit or eliminate choices; the second theory describes people as having practically no control over the world in which they live, to the point where they may be simply "cogs in the machine" or "victims of society." A third position proposes that the difficulty behind these extreme positions lies in seeing individuals and society as wholly different things. But rules and resources don't exist independently – they depend on the existence of people and their ideas about what they are doing. Equally, what individuals do is always within the context of a society. At every moment, individuals are constructing society, and society is constructing individuals. The two are inextricable. Thus, like the sides of one coin, if you look at an activity from one perspective, you'll see individuals going about their daily lives; look at it another way, you'll see rules and resources comprising social structures. The two are conjoined in a single, active process, and once a moment in history has passed, what remains are but the traces it leaves in memory. Society operates the same way as language does: speaking English draws on one's knowledge of the rules that make up the English language, and simultaneously continues the language's existence; but the language only exists when we speak, read or write it. Thus society exists only through individuals' acts of repeating the rules, in the present. However, individuals can introduce small changes, which can accumulate. All told, institutions, ideas, and individuals always have a social nature, and they have a fluid, ever-changing quality. One version of this theory is termed "social constructionism."

The final view agrees that individuals and society mutually shape each other, but it maintains that the two remain different things, not flip sides of one thing. Individuals and society each have features that are largely independent of the other, such as physical bodies for the one and economic systems for the other. But because they're different things, they aren't in sync, and society doesn't exist only in the present. Time and the causes of social change snap into focus as aspects of society's existence. People can't wake up one day with new ideas about social roles and resources, and instantly transform the society they live in; conversely, social rules may alter, yet some individuals will behave just as they did before (e.g., some people discriminate even after it becomes illegal). People can change society, but only within the preexisting circumstances that society has placed upon their actions. We live in(side) the past: society depends on people's activities for its existence, but principally on the activities of people who lived previously. Some of their legacy has been swept away, some of it remains but has been reshaped, some of it continues largely unaltered. (For instance, the latest hit song in Western countries probably uses the notes of the twelve-tone scale that began taking shape in ancient Greece 2,500 years ago, rather than a pentatonic scale like those of Asia and Africa.) Thus one historical era may begin long before the previous one has come to a close, and incremental adjustments can suddenly spark radical upheavals. Likewise, a world phenomenon like globalization may seem to bulldoze everything in its path, yet its impact on different countries

varies drastically. In short, under this theory (which has been called a "transformational" model of social activity), history is messy.

Although the authors of *Theatre Histories* have somewhat varying positions, on the whole we take the last view. Theatre history's messiness is reflected in every chapter, because cultures don't change at the same rate or in the same manner, and their genres of theatrical performance vary widely. We make one aspect of theatre history's untidiness particularly conspicuous through our **periodization**. Chapters always overlap chronologically, sometimes in complicated ways: for instance, Chapter 4 covers roughly 1250–1650, Chapter 5 addresses 1550–1650, and Chapter 6 examines 1600–1770, which overlaps even Chapter 4. Many different factors came into play regarding our decisions about where to draw the dividing lines (which are necessarily a bit arbitrary), and we often had to wrestle with questions about where to place certain topics. In fact among historians generally, periodization is often disputed. Was there a Renaissance in Europe, and if so, when, where and for whom? It depends on what countries and social groups one has in mind, what activities one thinks distinguish that period, and whether one thinks "Renaissance" is even a valid description. Similarly, how does one periodize when developments in (say) East Asia and Western Europe follow different paths? Sometimes themes tell us more than chronology.

History as the construction of truth

The need to focus on particular aspects of historical events, the collection and interpretation of evidence, the development of a narrative, and the historian's perspective and concept of society can be summarized by the sentence "History is constructed." We piece it together and build an argument. However, even though any understanding of history is a construct, and a range of interpretations may be supported by evidence and logic, neither the notion that all perspectives are equally true nor the idea that they are all merely opinions (lacking a distinctive validity) holds up to scrutiny. In short, interpreting the past is not a free-for-all. It possesses objective as well as subjective facets. Not all interpretations are valid, historians can make mistakes, and some theories are flat-out wrong, no matter how insistently they might be espoused. We may never know with *absolute* certainty that certain claims are correct. But absolute certainty isn't required in order for us to be confident that a statement is true: truth is more like "certainty beyond a reasonable doubt."

Theatre and the history of communication

The interpretation of history adopted in *Theatre Histories* appears in the way we perceive an interplay between individuals and society; it is also manifested through how we handle social structures. Society has numerous structures, including the economic system, political power relations, sex/gender relationships, race and ethnicity, religion, education, transportation, agriculture, health care, international relations, and so on. Changes in one structure often affect the others, and several may be involved in a single historical change. The relative importance or weight one should give to a particular structure depends partly on what one is discussing, and the perspective one brings to it. To take one example, the history of American popular music might pay special attention to the role of race. Theatre, we believe, was most deeply affected historically by communication practices, by which we mean the way a society develops and uses one or more means of communication, such as speech, handwriting, printing, and electric/electronic media.

Why communication? The principal reason is "the primacy of practice," a theory about the formation of knowledge, which holds that many of our ideas and thought processes arise through ordinary practical activities rather than abstract reasoning; at a larger level, it also means that testing ideas in the real world provides better evidence for truth claims than logic alone – as the saying goes, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." The "primacy of practice" theory has a long pedigree in such fields as philosophy and child development. Lately it has received additional support from cognitive science and linguistics, which have shown that much of human thought is structured by metaphors derived from experiences interacting with the world. For instance, by putting objects into a container and taking them out again, we form the conceptual models or "schemas" of inside/outside and container/contained. These schemas become the basis for metaphors that help us interpret the world we live in, through expressions like "Andy felt *out* of place," "Lucinda ran *in* a marathon on Saturday," and "They're *within* their rights to insist on a refund." Similarly, crawling on a floor as an infant teaches us the schema source–path–goal, which is expressed in statements like "Carol is *headed for* trouble," "Dana and Drew have been *going out* together for months," and "Marcus *started* working as a systems analyst." All sorts of objects, conditions, and activities can be the source of metaphors: "He's *hot* but he's got a *cold* heart" (temperature is attractiveness), "She's in it for the *long haul*" (commitment is lengthy travel), "I think Professor Merrimack has a *screw loose*" (the mind is a machine), and so forth. We use most of these metaphors without being aware of them.

If our everyday interactions with the world provide metaphors for understanding it, then some of those metaphors must come from our communication practices. *How* we communicate – through speech, handwritten notes, text messages, etc. – is clearly different from *what* we communicate. But how we communicate is also more than the means of communication themselves, because as we will see, it involves the ways in which people in a particular society actually use the means of communication. Communication practices provide ways of understanding the world that help define a culture. The point is extremely important for the study of theatre, because in its most commonplace, paradigmatic form, theatre involves the *oral* performance of a *written* script, thus combining the two fundamental modes of communication. That blend forges a strong bond between theatrical performance and communication practices.

Even though one can't separate the means of communication from its social usage, the historical development of communication technology is still important. One can periodize the history of communication in various ways. The most obvious approach is to distinguish between **oral cultures**, **manuscript cultures**, **print cultures**, and **electric and electronic cultures**. But there are other possibilities. For example, one could argue that there are really only two major eras: first, oral cultures, which have no form of writing whatsoever; then, the era of literate cultures, which has numerous sub-periods. But this simple dividing line turns out to be not quite so simple. On the one hand, there have been cultures which had writing but gave it a minor role culturally, so in a technical sense they may have been literate, but for most practical purposes, they remained oral; on the other hand, oral communication is hugely important in even the most technologically sophisticated society with nearly universal literacy. Another approach to periodizing communication history might hold that there is a significant shift between the electronic culture of the television, radio, and telephone, vs. the socially networked culture of the computer, the internet, and especially mobile devices; in other words, one could break down the history of communication into shorter periods.

For *Theatre Histories*, we are using four periods, which are represented in the four parts of the book. Our focus, however, is on the connection between changes in a society's communication practices, and the shifts and commonalities in performance and in the culture at large. For that reason, the book's parts don't match the technological changes. First, after considering performance in oral culture, we examine theatre in various types of early literate and then manuscript cultures, when all writing had to be done by hand; but in all of these cultures, to a greater or lesser extent the spoken word still played a major cultural role. The next period hinges on the introduction of the printing press, which radically transformed the way books were produced and disseminated, and made writing culturally dominant throughout Europe. Our third period arises from a change that occurred not in communication technology, but in the way an existing technology was used: publishing on a recurrent, periodical basis became logistically viable, leading to the creation of newspapers, magazines, and journals of various sorts. Finally, we address the rise of electric and electronic modes of communication, which have undergone numerous technological transformations that have not ended to this day. Although there's reason to think that electronic communication is not yet dominant in the sense of structuring thought and there are numerous explorations in how to use it (some successful, some not), that seems to be the direction world culture is taking.

But it's vital to remember that the dominance of any mode of communication is always relative to other modes of communication, and specific to particular societies. What emerges in North America, Europe, Japan, Australia, and similarly developed parts of the world can't be extrapolated elsewhere. The reality is that in 2015, about 15 percent of the world's population had no access to electricity, let alone computers; roughly 55 percent had no access to the internet. Although mobile technologies are making rapid inroads, the digital divide between the connected and unconnected will be extremely difficult to overcome, and might never be eliminated. As for the developed world, assuming online communication becomes dominant, the older means of communication – speech, handwriting, and printing – will nevertheless continue to be used in one form or another. Their techniques and functions may change, as they have for handwriting: it used to serve all purposes, but today the only activity that requires it is writing signatures (and increasingly, not even that); signatures were once written on parchment, which was replaced by paper, and now paper is being replaced by an electronic pad and stylus. However, whatever else changes in the face of electronic communication, the older communication media will not vanish.

The continuing role of older modes of communication touches on questions of how quickly and completely changes occur. There is a tendency to view or at least present changes in communication as revolutionary and total – a sudden, radical shift from an oral culture to a literate culture, thoroughly dominated by writing; a quick, wholesale change from a print culture to an electronic culture. This idea suffers many problems, one of which is how one should define "literate." Historically, many people have been able to read but unable to write: is that an acceptable definition of literacy? Scholars don't all agree. Similarly, scholars who believe "literate" means "able to write" have varying opinions on whether the ability to write one's name but little else suffices for literacy. The problem in defining written literacy has its parallel in "computer literacy": for instance, even "digital natives" are often unable to code, are unfamiliar with the sophisticated tools available in their word processor, and have very poor online search skills. A further difficulty is determining the threshold at which a society is "literate": are there times when 1 percent is high enough because it includes the people in

power, or 75 percent too low because it excludes too many people with little power? The problems in defining "literacy" and selecting a good threshold, together with the fact that there are long periods of overlap, make it attractive to reject "revolution" in favor of a slow "evolution." On the other hand, "slow" is vague: given that writing has existed for roughly 5,600 years, is 50 or even 100 years slow? To many historians, that's quite rapid. The position taken in *Theatre Histories* is that on the whole, change is evolutionary and uneven, but there are some periods that really can be described as revolutions in communication.

The key question, however, is how – or whether – changes in communication affect culture. There are three basic views. One is that communication technologies affect everything that pertains to communication and culture, and their impact is the same everywhere – they're the only factor one needs to consider. This view is called "technological determinism," and it is probably the most widespread. A contrasting argument is that actually, technologies have no particular effects or tendencies: instead, only social activities such as education have any role. *Theatre Histories* takes the view that both technological and social aspects are at play. Technologies present various possibilities, but they aren't infinitely malleable – they can only do a certain range of things, they are better suited for some purposes than for others, and they may serve or promote certain uses more than others (possibly inadvertently). Which specific possibilities become reality depends on things that people do in society at large. YouTube, for example, started as an online dating site, but within weeks its creators discovered that people were uploading all sorts of videos, and mere months later corporations were posting ads. Some people use YouTube as a sort of online radio with videos displaying a static image, but that's a weak usage of its capabilities. However, the technology behind YouTube renders it incapable of supplanting Skype.

What happened to YouTube is a good demonstration of the only indisputable law of history: the law of unintended consequences. People may believe that the intentions of great leaders and innovators are foremost in the "march of history," but at most that's only partly the case, and often not true at all. When the printing press was invented in Europe, nobody could have anticipated that it would facilitate a cultural renaissance, a scientific revolution, and the most savage religious schism the continent ever endured. Those effects and more had fundamental connections to the simple experience of using printed books, and the mental habits and metaphors that those experiences fostered. In the future too, history will have complex overlaps, multiple timelines, interweavings, lurches, and surprises. Theatre will trace a similarly unpredictable path as people absorb, respond to, act upon, and think within changing communication practices.

We will describe in more detail the specific ways in which communication shapes theatre and drama within each of *Theatre Histories*' four parts. Here, however, we need to observe that theatre not only has powerful ties to communication, it is also strongly affected by other social structures, such as economics, political structures, and the sex/gender system. The different factors influencing the stage interconnect in various ways and further complicate the history of theatre. To reflect that fact, within the larger context of communication that established this book's parts, the individual chapters often pay special attention to other social structures.

The structure of *Theatre Histories*

Theatre Histories has three primary types of material: the main text, boxes titled "Thinking through theatre histories," and case studies. There are also a few boxes concerning particular

points or information that readers should be aware of, and we have a range of additional resources on the *Theatre Histories* website.

The main text describes the principal developments in theatre history, which broadly speaking we've organized chronologically. However, as we've observed, historical periods have no clear-cut boundaries, and so every chapter overlaps others. Within each chapter, we usually adopt either a geographic or a thematic approach. From continent to continent, theatre often develops independently, but within a continent, sometimes conditions are so similar or there is so much traffic – instructions on how to demonstrate religious devotion, touring theatre companies that display "how it's done," and other types of intercommunication – that a country-by-country approach would distract from the overall pattern. On the other hand, seeing the similarities and dissimilarities between theatre traditions during a single time frame can help readers think about performance comparatively.

But more often the chapter is organized thematically. The topics necessarily vary from chapter to chapter, but frequently the chapter begins with the historical context and the forces driving the events that shape theatrical performance. Chapter 4, for instance, observes that the growing cities in Europe and Asia were increasingly able to support theatre as a vocation. As a result, theatre was no longer tethered to festivals, aristocratic courtyards, and similar venues. Professional theatre troupes developed in China, Europe and Japan, dependent initially on touring, but in Europe and Japan they eventually resided in buildings built for play-going.

As noted above, we have grouped the chapters into four parts, characterized by the developments in communication practices.

- Part I briefly addresses performance in oral cultures, and then turns attention to theatre when writing could only be produced by hand, and the cultures in many respects remained oriented around orality. Several societies developed major theatre traditions during this period, among them Europe, India, Japan, and China; and everywhere, there were forms of celebratory and commemorative performance.
- Part II surveys theatre during the first 250 years or so of print culture in Europe, and contemporaneous developments in Asia. First, we consider the rise of professional theatre companies, which occurred in many parts of the world, mainly as the result of growing prosperity and urbanization. Our examination of the print revolution in Europe highlights the cultural changes and conflicts that arose out of it, and then the formation of highly centralized monarchies, which often utilized print as a way to shore up their power. These developments strongly influenced concepts of character and plot, and theatre professionals started seeking artistic realism in one sense or another.
- Part III concerns theatre in the next three centuries of print culture, distinguished by the development of the periodical press. This new use of print fostered new roles for theatre in European society, through which theatre contributed to and was influenced by the political structures that were emerging from capitalism, particularly nationalism. The trend toward globalization began, and the resulting intercultural contact had both innovative and oppressive effects. Realism became increasingly well-defined and established in Western theatre, and also spread to Japan. Toward the end of this era, entirely new media based mainly on electricity started to shatter print culture's modes of thought, promoting a new phenomenon: non-realistic, avant-garde theatre.

- Part IV picks up the thread as electric and then electronic communication played an increasingly prominent cultural role. On the one hand, various forms of realism dominated in mainstream theatre (except for musicals); on the other hand, avant-garde genres were constantly being invented. Avant-gardes challenged nearly every aspect of theatre, such as the importance of the dramatic text versus performance, what counted as a performance space and how it could be used, what performance consisted of, and who could be a performer. In addition, within both the mainstream and the avant-garde, some forms of theatre sought to challenge the political ideologies, institutions and forces of their society. Often electronic communication provided models or tools for these developments.

Each part opens with a short introduction that summarizes what that part will cover, and raises philosophical issues stemming from the broad developments in theatre's history.

The "Thinking through theatre histories" sections present subjects in historiography, such as theories and methodologies (for instance, queer theory, and the ideas of literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin); particularly topical questions (e.g., the notion of "origins," and theatre's connection to concepts of national identity); and the strategies historians use to obtain evidence, communicate their interpretations, or convince readers of their validity (such as how extreme examples can reveal larger trends). These sections aim to help the reader grasp the problems theatre historians face and the choices they make when studying historical events. Of course, these segments hardly exhaust the enormous variety of historiographical theories, questions, and strategies – they cover only the tip of the tip of the iceberg.

Finally, each chapter has one or two case studies, which look in depth at a performance genre, play, or dramatist, or some other aspect of theatre. Some case studies involve an explicit historiographical approach or issue, which is described in a "Thinking through theatre histories" box, enabling students to see how a theory or strategy might be applied in practice. In other instances we do not present any specific theory, allowing students to consider (on their own or with their instructor) what sorts of ideas and techniques guide the case study.

We close this introduction by returning to our starting point. We began by discussing some major terms: theatre, drama, and performance. There has been and continues to be enormous diversity in the theatrical performance practices of the world, both geographically and chronologically. Diverse forces have shaped theatre's development throughout its history. And there is a diversity of theories, facets, emphases, and goals in theatre historiography. In writing this book, our aim has been to introduce all of these dimensions of writing about theatre in history. That, then, is the meaning of the plural in the title, *Theatre Histories*.

A NOTE ON RESOURCES AND CONVENTIONS

Additional resources

We offer many resources beyond the text itself. At the end of the book's four parts, we list the books and articles that we cited in the text. That section also lists selected audiovisual resources, including recordings of performances, short documentaries, and websites, which

continued

are marked in the margin with a camera icon. Routledge's companion website for this book (www.theatrehistories.com) offers texts drawn from previous editions of this book, including case studies and short essays on various topics. These are indicated in the margin with a Companion Website icon. We include pronunciation guidance for many foreign terms within the text (in square brackets) and at the back of the book, with online recordings flagged with a headphone icon. Terms printed in **blue** are briefly defined in the Glossary toward the end of the book; other terms can be located by using the Index. The companion website lists further online resources, and the many books and articles that we used in writing *Theatre Histories* but didn't specifically cite in the text or that a reader wanting more information would find useful.

There is one caveat about online resources. The internet can be an astonishingly rich source of valuable information, thoughtful analysis, and videos of brilliant performance. On the other hand, anyone can put up a website with information and opinions that represent no special expertise, present outdated scholarship, or even intentionally misrepresent facts. It is best to use websites in conjunction with current scholarly books and articles, which have been vetted by experts and often represent new research and ideas not reflected in websites.

Diacritics, spellings, names, and capitalization

We have followed common scholarly usage in diacritical markings and Romanized spellings of terms from the many languages used in this text. Japanese and Chinese names place the family name first (e.g., Suzuki Tadashi), which we follow unless the person has adopted Western usage.

Scholarly practices for capitalization vary. To the extent possible, we capitalize the names of movements, reasonably identifiable groups, and geographical regions. Some examples are Romanticism, the Romantics, Realism (as an artistic movement), Symbolism, Asian, and Western. We leave in lower case the terms for ideas, theories, and styles, when they are not necessarily connected to a particular movement or group of people: for instance, positivism, positivists, realism (as a set of ideas and stylistic goals), and symbolism (the use of symbols in general). Occasionally this convention leads to seemingly odd combinations, such as when we discuss "realism and Naturalism," but the reason should be clear from the text.

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PART I

Performance in oral and manuscript cultures

PART I TIMELINE

DATE	THEATRE and PERFORMANCE	CULTURE and COMMUNICATION	POLITICS and ECONOMICS
200,000–190,000 BCE			Beginnings of modern humans
100,000–60,000 BCE		Beginnings of language	
*c.*5500–*c.*4000 BCE			Ancient civilization in Sumer (southern Iraq)
*c.*3800 BCE			Ancient civilization in Crete
*c.*3200–1800 BCE			Earliest South American civilization (Peru)
*c.*3150–2686 BCE			First dynasty, Egypt
*c.*3000 BCE–[?]	Performance, festivals, Mesoamerica		
*c.*2700 BCE		Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*	
		Egyptian hieroglyphs	
*c.*2070–*c.*1600 BCE			Xia dynasty, China
*c.*2055 BCE–[?]	Abydos "Passion Play," Egypt		
*c.*2000–*c.*1000 BCE			Earliest Mayan civilization
*c.*1600–*c.*1046 BCE		Chinese writing	Shang dynasty, China
*c.*1180 BCE			Trojan War
*c.*1050 BCE		Phoenician script	
*c.*1000 BCE	Hopi performances, North America		
	Celtic rituals, bardic festivals, Europe		
*c.*850 BCE		Greek alphabet	
*c.*800 BCE	Homer and bardic performance, Greece		
		Written Sanskrit	
776 BCE		Olympic games, Greece	
753 BCE			Founding of Rome
*c.*600 BCE		Writing in Mesoamerica	
*c.*563–483 BCE		Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha), India	
551–478 BCE		Confucius, China	
534 BCE	Early form of Greek tragedy performed by Thespis		
*c.*525–*c.*456 BCE	Aeschylus, playwright		
509–27 BCE			Roman Republic
499–479 BCE			Greco-Persian wars
*c.*497–*c.*405 BCE	Sophocles, playwright		
*c.*480–406 BCE	Euripides, playwright		
460–429 BCE			Periclean age, Athens
*c.*448–*c.*387 BCE	Aristophanes, playwright		
431–404 BCE			Peloponnesian War
*c.*400	*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, Sanskrit epics, India		

PART I TIMELINE

DATE	THEATRE and PERFORMANCE	CULTURE and COMMUNICATION	POLITICS and ECONOMICS
*c.*380 BCE		Plato, *The Republic*	
356–323 BCE			Alexander the Great, Europe and Asia
*c.*342–*c.*291 BCE	Menander, playwright		
*c.*330 BCE	Aristotle, *The Poetics*		
323 BCE–31 CE			Hellenistic period, Europe
*c.*254–184 BCE	Plautus, playwright		
206 BCE–220 CE			Han dynasty, China
204 BCE–65 CE	Roman drama		
200 BCE–200 CE	Bharata writes *Natyasastra*, India		
196 BCE		Rosetta stone	
*c.*190–*c.*159 BCE	Terence, playwright		
27 BCE–476 CE			Roman Empire
27 BCE–14 CE			Caesar Augustus, first emperor of Roman Empire
*c.*4 BCE–29 CE		Jesus of Nazareth, Middle East/ Europe	
*c.*4 BCE–65 CE	Seneca, playwright		
50–150 CE		Buddhism enters China	
250–710 CE			Yamato period, Japan
250–900 CE			Mayan classical period, Yucatan peninsula
476 CE			Western Roman Empire falls; Eastern (Byzantine) Empire continues
533 CE	Last known theatre performance within the former Roman Empire		
570–632 CE		Mohammed, Middle East	
618–907 CE			Tang dynasty, China
790–1066 CE			Viking exploration
800–1100 CE			Trans-Sahara trade routes
*c.*900 CE	Chinese story recitation		
	Kutiyattam temple theatre, India		
900–1550 CE			Mayan post Classic Period, Yucatan peninsula
*c.*925 CE	Catholic liturgical tropes		
*c.*1040 CE		Movable type, China	
1066 CE			Normans (Northern French) conquer England
1095–1099 CE		First Christian crusade against Muslims	
*c.*1100 CE	Development of carnival, Europe		

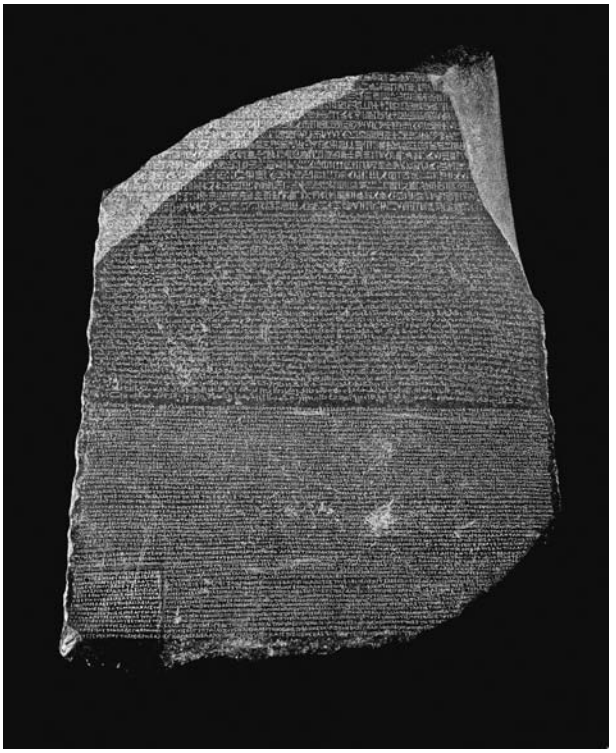
PART I TIMELINE

DATE	THEATRE and PERFORMANCE	CULTURE and COMMUNICATION	POLITICS and ECONOMICS
1254–1324 CE		Marco Polo, Italian merchant traveler	
1266–1337 CE		Giotto, artist	
1279–1368 CE			Yuan dynasty, China
1279–1654 CE	*Zaju*, China		
*c.*1300–*c.*1400 CE	*Ramlila*, India		
*c.*1300–*c.*1600 CE		Renaissance era begins in Italy; spreads throughout Europe in the sixteenth century	
1313–*c.*1600 CE	Passion plays, continental Europe		
1343–1400 CE		Geoffrey Chaucer, English writer	
*c.*1350–1569 CE	Cycle plays, England		
1363–1443 CE	Zeami, actor-playwright		
1368–1644 CE			Ming dynasty, China
1368–1644 CE	*Zaju* and *kunqu*, China		
*c.*1374 CE	*Nō*, Japan		
1428–1521 CE			Aztec Empire, Central America
*c.*1440 CE	*Rabinal Achi*, Mesoamerica	Movable type (printing press), Europe	
1452–1519 CE		Leonardo da Vinci, artist	
1453 CE			Ottomans capture Constantinople
1456 CE		First printed Bible	
1468–1834 CE			Spanish Inquisition
1475–1564 CE		Michelangelo, artist	
1492 CE			Spanish encounter with the Americas
1492–1898 CE			Spanish colonization of Western Hemisphere
*c.*1500 CE	Professional theatre companies begin to appear in various European countries		
*c.*1500–1600 CE	*Kathakali* dance drama, India		

Introduction: Speech, writing, and performance

Tobin Nellhaus

The focus of Part I is the transition from purely **oral culture** to **literate culture**. Its three chapters cover roughly 2,000 years of theatre history, from the fifth century BCE to the sixteenth century CE, in order to discuss performance in the context of oral culture and several different literate cultures. The importance and functions of writing varied across the world, and changed over time; as a result, its relationship with oral culture varied, as did its cultural impact. In most of the world, writing's usage and significance were quite limited. However, due to several unusual circumstances, in the fifth century BCE writing attained widespread importance in the city of Athens, Greece. The repercussions could not have been predicted, but they were vast.



The Rosetta stone displays a decree of 196 BCE in three scripts: ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, Demotic script, and ancient Greek.

Source: © AKG-images, London.

Because of the importance of oral culture, we begin Chapter 1 by considering storytelling and ritual, two primary types of performance for over one hundred millennia before writing even existed. Writing first appeared some time around 3,500 BCE in a region of the Middle East. A few centuries later, hieroglyphic writing developed in Egypt. It was learned by portions of the society's upper echelons; the culture as a whole remained predominantly oral. As early as the nineteenth century BCE, a mass religious ceremony in Egypt may have had elements characteristic of theatre. Next we leap forward chronologically in order to discuss performance in Central America and southern Mexico, where conditions of literacy were similar to those of ancient Egypt. Some time during the fifteenth century CE, the Mayan people created a performance which commemorated a historical event and appears to have been more like theatre as we know it. We then return to the ancient world to examine the rise of theatre in Athens, where literacy gained a far larger cultural role than ever before. Like Mayan performance, its topics drew from myths and known history, but (perhaps uniquely for the ancient world) it addressed these topics primarily as a way to focus on issues of civic life. In addition, Greek drama was strongly oriented around texts. When classical Greek plays became available in the West again 2,000 years later, they were highly influential, and they are performed even today.

Chapter 2 continues our study of early theatres. Rome in the second and first centuries BCE sought to imitate the culture of Greece, but its tragedies turned from civic commentary to sensationalism, and the comedies shifted from satires toward domestic issues. Eventually interest swung toward violent spectacles such as gladiatorial combat, presented to a mass

audience in huge arenas. In classical India (roughly the first through the eleventh centuries CE), theatre was intended to be both popular entertainment and a source of good counsel, and the early plays often drew on two major epics for their narratives. Theatre practitioners in classical India paid exceptional attention to qualities of performance rather than the dramatic text. In the fourteenth century CE, a Japanese troupe offering variety performances came under aristocratic influence and developed a genre of serious drama, which spread across the country. In the course of this development, early Japanese theatre absorbed religious and philosophical ideas. As in India, theatre artists were keenly aware of performance.

The developments in these diverse parts of the world show the highly varied interactions and combinations of literary work and entertainment on the one hand, and elite and popular performance on the other. Those interactions were rooted in the complex interactions between oral culture and literate culture, which played out differently depending on the particular social circumstances.

In Chapter 3, our attention turns primarily to performance in the context of a significant change in literate culture: the rise of religions founded on a set of holy scriptures. Judaism was based on the Torah; Christianity used the Bible, comprising the Torah as the "Old Testament" and many later texts called the New Testament; and Islam's holy book was the Qur'an, a work which assumes knowledge of the Jewish and Christian biblical literature but is a separate set of texts. Unlike spiritual documents in other major religions, these books are considered holy in themselves – unalterable, doctrinal, and even thought to be dictated or revealed directly by God. As a result, these texts occupied extraordinary positions within their cultures and played a crucial role in the cultures' histories. That situation added to the complexity of the relationship between oral culture and literate culture in these societies.

Although the three religions all had a set of holy writings, both literacy and performance developed differently in each. Judaism and early Islam considered literacy part of religious practice, although in some contexts as a support to their oral traditions rather than an independent mode of communication. Jews were an oppressed minority within Europe who had limited opportunities to develop performance practices, but even so, evidence indicates that some Jews acted, and a play was based on a biblical text. Islam reversed its stand on education during the eleventh century and (to a greater or lesser extent) it condemned all representations of people, in theatre and elsewhere; but important types of performance arose nevertheless, such as puppetry. Unlike Judaism and Islam, medieval Christianity had no imperative toward widespread literacy. As in Islam, however, the Church long prohibited theatrical performance. But in the fourteenth century the Church began to find theatre useful, and allowed other types of performance as well. As a result, theatre developed furthest in Christian Europe. Many of the performances within all three religions commemorated events within each religion's sacred literature, honored major events in the religion's history, or enacted the religion's ideas and values. Within Europe there were also important types of wholly secular performance such as farce, and several occasions for boisterous public celebration, feasting, and release, sometimes involving masks and/or role-play.

The prohibition against theatre throughout the history of Islam, for over a millennium in Christianity, and occasionally in Judaism raises a puzzling question: why would a type of performance closely related to the rise of literacy be banned in cultures that depended on writing? The hostility toward theatre was occasionally venomous. For example, a few decades after the medieval Church began encouraging religious drama in England, an unknown

author wrote an almost hysterical diatribe against it. It is as though theatre's adversaries found something fundamentally unnerving and disruptive about acting itself. Theatre was too deeply tied to the body and a notion of personal falsity, and so actors were eventually associated with licentious sex and considered similar to or the same as prostitutes. Such disapproval, which surrounded theatre for much of its existence, seems unfamiliar today.

But this **antitheatricality** is quite old. In Part I we consider the beginnings of theatre; however, when we speak of the birth of theatre, it's important to realize that in the Western world, theatre wasn't an only child: antitheatricality was its sibling. Despite its frequent association with religion, antitheatricality isn't strictly a matter of faiths and holy books: it arose soon after the creation of literary theatre itself, in a polytheistic culture without scriptures. In ancient Athens, the philosopher Plato (*c.*428–*c.*347 BCE), writing at a time when Greek drama was at its height, strongly condemned theatre, along with painting, sculpture, poetry, indeed anything that smelled of what he called ***mimesis*** (imitation). In fact, he decried writing as inferior to speech. Yet paradoxically, despite his distrust of writing, Plato wrote books, and stranger still, he wrote his books as dialogues – as near to drama as one can get without actual performance. Most ironically of all, according to classical scholar Eric Havelock (1963), Plato's antagonism toward theatre arose from the way literacy shaped his concept of rationality. And as Jonas Barish (1981) has shown, these are not the only peculiarities in Plato's antitheatrical arguments.

Plato's prosecution of theatre was based on the belief that true reality is to be found in abstractions, not in the embodied material world. From this assumption, Plato staged two fundamental attacks on the stage. On the one hand, philosophically, Plato construed theatre's fictions as lies, or at best, feeble imitations of the truth. Thus theatre trades in illusions and falsehoods, and the actor in particular violates personal identity by pretending to be someone else. On the other hand, moralistically, if truth resides in abstractions, then the mind as the seat of reason sharply contrasts with the body as the realm of unreason, passion, pleasures, and desires. Theatre, then, wrongly encourages audiences to enjoy unruly emotions and improper ideas instead of conducting rational thought.

Plato's antitheatrical ideas passed down through the centuries within Christianity, and they may also be the origin of antitheatricality in Islam. To a greater or lesser extent, mimesis was seen as an affront to God. The philosophical and moralistic strands did not always have the same importance – in fact the moralistic stance was usually expressed more vigorously – but they were always intertwined.

But why did Plato's antitheatrical prejudice arise in the first place, and why did later cultures accept it? Most likely several factors lay behind the sometimes panicky assaults on theatre in the Western world. According to Havelock, one reason for Plato's animosity is that when writing developed in ancient Greece, it created a break with oral culture and reshaped the reasoning process. Plato was creating an analytical, "objective" mode of thought based on literacy, and opposed to the more "subjective," participatory oral culture, and mimesis was intrinsic to orality's participatory nature (1963: 36–49). It appears that not only is there a connection between theatre and writing, there is also a connection between antitheatricality and writing.

Yet as we noted, in Plato's opinion speech is superior to writing and more closely aligned with truth and nature. At first glance, Plato seems to be contradicting himself, opposing oral culture on one hand but supporting it with the other. However, his opposition was not to all parts of oral culture, but to its embodied, performative element. In contrast, for Plato writing was intrinsically objectionable because the written word is secondary, an imitation (mimesis)

of speech sounds – living speech bore truth. The philosopher Jacques Derrida uses the term "phonocentrism" to describe this view of writing as mimetic, and it has persisted even to the present. The logic of phonocentrism, Derrida observes, leads to antitheatricality, because it construes theatre as fundamentally mimetic as well. Thus both phonocentrism and antitheatricality derived from the phonetic nature of alphabetic writing (1974: 304–7).

The embodiment necessary to communication in oral cultures seems to have long been distasteful or outright abhorrent to thinkers who believed that writing allowed the mind to become disembodied, creating a sharp body/mind division. However, this aversion arises not only when thinkers take a phonocentric position, but also when they prefer the written word. Some people have maintained that drama is best read as literature, unconnected with performance. The earliest instance is also from ancient Greece. Despite Plato, theatre remained popular there, and as a result it wasn't long before a more positive view of drama appeared in philosophy: Plato's former student Aristotle (384–322 BCE) argued that mimesis and the pleasure we take in it are vital to human learning, and based on this perspective he wrote the first dramatic theory in history. But notably, Aristotle preferred the dramatic text over its performance, reiterating a form of antitheatricality.

Today, when actors are among the greatest celebrities and can even become presidents, antitheatricality may seem utterly foreign and archaic. Closer examination shows otherwise. We saw in the General Introduction that both "drama" and "theatre" are sometimes applied metaphorically. Some of those uses are decidedly derogatory. For example, a person who behaves over-emotionally might be called a "drama queen." Public events or statements meant mainly to impress people are occasionally described as "theatre," such as in "The candidate's demand for a recount was just political theatre" or, deplorably, "*kabuki* theatre," insinuating that a Japanese genre is especially devious. The modern meanings of "hypocrite" and "histrionic" have antitheatrical roots as well. (The looser term "performance" generally has more positive associations.) The common view that drama should be studied strictly as literature, not in connection with performance, denigrates theatre as well.

Even in the history of Western theatre, key figures such as the seventeenth-century English dramatist Ben Jonson and the early twentieth-century French performer and writer Antonin Artaud have been sharply conflicted about theatricality. Performance art, a genre which emerged in the late twentieth century, has always spurned theatre. Strangely enough, antitheatricality can appear within theatricality itself.

Thus the history of theatre in the West is shadowed by an antitheatricality founded on the history of writing. In contrast, generally speaking, non-Western societies seem to have taken much more straightforward pleasure in performance. Although people in classical India, China, and Japan sometimes scorned actors and classed them with prostitutes just as in the West, they seem to have done so out of a fear of social disorder or class mixing, not a deep-seated suspicion of theatre as such. Why they didn't develop an antitheatrical prejudice is an open question. The absence of Plato's influence was undoubtedly one factor, but probably there were other reasons – perhaps a more fluid relationship between oral and literate culture. We do not yet know. But as we begin surveying theatre's histories, we should be aware that it has always been dense with complexities rooted in fundamental communication practices.

*

CHAPTER 1

From oral to literate performance

Tobin Nellhaus

Contributors: Phillip B. Zarrilli, Tamara Underiner, and Bruce McConachie

Nobody knows for certain how theatre began. Probably nobody ever will. But we do know some things about the earliest forms of theatre and about types of performance that preceded theatre. One increasingly evident element is that performance is shaped by communication practices. For tens or hundreds of millennia, the primary mode of communication – and the only one for language – was speech, usually accompanied by gesture. In **oral cultures**, the major forms of performance are **ritual** and storytelling. As we will see, characteristics of these performance genres are affected by the nature of live speech, which fosters certain strategies of thought. Writing first appeared around 3600–3400 BCE in Mesopotamia (a region within the Middle East), and slowly spread or was separately invented elsewhere. However, for thousands of years writing was so embedded within oral culture that it had few if any cognitive effects. Eventually new ways of thinking did arise, and with them a new form of performance: theatre.

But oral modes of performance are by no means "primitive" or solely part of the past: they are dynamic and adaptable practices that continue to shape people's personal and social identities, plus many other aspects of human thought and culture. Ritual and storytelling in particular remain important to this day. Likewise, the introduction of literate culture did not create a form of performance that was utterly separate from oral culture. The relationship between spoken and written communication is complex and varies depending on its social context, and it can be marked by a degree of tension, which sometimes is visible in performance itself, particularly during the transition from an oral to a **literate culture**. The presence of oral culture in literate culture is one of the primary reasons for discussing ritual and storytelling when examining the earliest forms of theatre.

In this chapter we will focus on how the introduction of writing affected performance, by considering four different communication contexts. First we will discuss ritual and storytelling in oral cultures. Then we will turn to a possibly theatrical ceremony in ancient Egypt, and a play-like performance in Mayan society (located in Central America and southern Mexico) –

two cultures which used writing but restricted it to a small number of people. Finally, we will look at theatre in ancient Greece, the earliest society where literacy was relatively widespread and figured in everyday life. Surveying these four contexts will suggest how the role and importance of writing varies from culture to culture, affecting numerous facets of performance. Even though we may not be able to identify theatre's origins, these social and cultural differences can help explain some of early theatre's known and likely characteristics.

THINKING THROUGH THEATRE HISTORIES

The problem of beginnings

Nothing in human society ever sprang from thin air, and so historians often want to learn how an activity began or what led to it. Starting in the 1870s, many people have asked that question about theatre, and in particular about Greek tragedy, for which we have more evidence than any other kind of ancient theatre. The question has three sides: identifying theatre's predecessor; explaining the process of change; and describing the relationship between theatre and its predecessor.

What *was* theatre's predecessor? There have been many answers, most of them anthropological. Probably the most popular answer has been religious ritual. One reason for this theory is that, as we will see, Greek tragedy had some sort of connection to the cult of the god Dionysus in the city of Athens (exactly what has been disputed). Other people have suggested that theatre originated in choral songs. But by the 1960s classical scholars had debunked the original forms of both of these theories because of major problems or gaps in their supporting evidence, the presence of contradicting evidence, and significant logical flaws. However, revised versions continue, and we will discuss a few ideas connected to them. Another answer has been hero worship, in which people honored dead heroes and kings by imitating events in their lives. This view has a somewhat stronger basis, but it doesn't have a firm grounding in our historical and archaeological knowledge about ancient Greece. A very different theory came from classical scholar Gerald Else, who argued that the major precedent for tragedy was a speech by Athens' leader Solon, in which he impersonated another man, a precedent that was developed further by others (Else 1965: 39–45). The evidence here is less speculative than in the other theories – but what makes Else's theory work well for Athens makes it less applicable to other places, which has limited its acceptance. Other theories have also been proposed.

The second side of any question about predecessors is the process of change and its possible implications. For example, if we accepted the popular (but dubious) "religious ritual" theory of theatre's inception, we should clarify how the one developed into the other. Did the development occur in a smooth or incremental progression of a more or less evolutionary nature? If so, then religious ritual and theatre probably existed (and perhaps still exist) along a continuum. In contrast, Else's view involves individuals taking distinct, innovative steps in order to accomplish something that couldn't be achieved with the existing forms of performance. Accordingly, religious ritual wouldn't be theatre's ancestor or origin, merely an antecedent. Theatre could be fundamentally different from ritual – a revolutionary cultural form. (Some scholars dismiss the process of change altogether, more or less saying "First there

continued

was religious ritual/choral songs/hero worship, then there was theatre, therefore there must be a connection even though we don't know how the former became the latter" – a version of the *post hoc* argument discussed in the General Introduction.)

Finally, one must consider the relationship between theatre and its predecessor. For example, what does it mean to say that X is the "origin" of theatre? Is that the same as saying it's the "earliest type" of theatre? One claim is that theatre's origin remains the essence of theatre itself (e.g., "theatre is fundamentally a religious ritual"). A converse view is that the origin was just the starting point: theatre was the goal or the final form of the previous activity ("ritual is fundamentally theatre"). A related position is that the origin of theatre is what caused it to develop. The validity of this idea depends on what the origin is thought to be: for example, if religious ritual is the origin of theatre, clearly it didn't drive theatre to become a more vigorous form of religion, so it probably didn't cause theatre to develop; a type of performance that strove for (say) social self-reflection would be more likely to generate what we now recognize as theatre. Theatre's predecessors could also be the "raw material" – the familiar activities – that people reworked when they created theatre. There are still further possibilities. Different ideas about the beginnings of theatre aren't mutually exclusive: much depends on what one is examining, and even on how one defines theatre. For instance, one can reject the ritual theory of theatre's origin yet believe that ritual and theatre exist on a continuum, so that each has qualities of the other. Likewise, one can hold that certain features are essential to all theatre, including the very earliest, but something else caused theatre to arise.

Theatre Histories focuses on the connections between the development of theatre and changes in communication. It seems likely that the activities involved in writing fostered methods of thinking that conflicted with oral culture's typical cognitive strategies, which appeared in cultural forms such as ritual and storytelling. In some societies the tension between the two modes of communication grew great enough to require new cultural forms, one of which was theatre – a fusion of oral performance and written text. But because some of oral culture's practices were adapted in order to create theatre, many of its features continued. Depending on how writing was used in a particular society, those elements of oral culture either remained more or less central to culture, or faded over several centuries until the spread of literacy made them unnecessary or possibly even undesirable. Although we cannot say that this theory has been definitively proven, understanding oral culture does help us understand several characteristics of early theatre. As we will see throughout this book, subsequent changes in communication practices similarly seem to have led to alterations in later forms of theatre.

Performance in oral cultures

For anyone silently reading this book (and for its authors too), it is difficult or impossible to completely grasp what oral culture is like because our own manner of thinking is already shaped by literacy. People unfamiliar with oral culture sometimes assume it is simply a relative of literate culture, or view it is a primitive form of thought devoid of abstraction and logical reasoning. However, studies conducted in Africa by cultural anthropologists, analyses of epic poetry from

places ranging from ancient Greece to modern Serbia, and various other types of research have demonstrated that neither view is correct. Oral cultures can be sophisticated, but their methods of conceptualizing the world and people's relationships to it are very different from those common in highly literate societies. The research helps us to imagine what life and performance were like in cultures without writing and reading, and to see that some forms or features of oral culture exist in every culture today.

Many of oral culture's characteristics arise from practical aspects of speech. A living person has to be present to speak, and another there to listen. Words use tones and rhythms, they can create rhymes or assonance, they can be spoken softly or loudly. Speech uses not only the mouth, throat, and chest, but also facial expressions and usually gestures and other movements, potentially involving the whole body. One learns from others primarily by listening to them, so the sense of hearing has special importance. And crucially, speech only exists in the moment: after that, there is only memory. Consequently, in oral cultures, knowledge, historical legend, religious beliefs, mythology, and all other aspects of culture must be passed on by elders and by "cultural specialists" such as shamans and storytellers.

Memory aids in oral cultures

If knowledge in oral cultures can only be stored in memory and transmitted through speech, how is that done? Although people in wholly oral cultures relied on their memories more than people in literate cultures and excellent memory was often prized, it was unusual to need verbatim recollection. Sometimes verbatim memorization did occur; for an example, see the discussion of the Indian Vedas in the "Primary Orality" essay on the *Theatre Histories* website. But in most circumstances, such precision was unnecessary. The essential goal was to express ideas in a way that made them easily remembered and easily learned.

Various techniques can aid memory, as we can see from a scene from the ancient Greek epic poem *The Odyssey* (eighth century BCE), which was composed orally. *The Odyssey* recounts the warrior Odysseus's lengthy travel home from the Trojan War (which occurred between Greece and a part of modern Turkey probably during the thirteenth century BCE; *The Iliad* tells that story). In this scene, Odysseus's son Telemachos is travelling with the goddess Athena in search of his long-missing father. They arrive at the town of Pylos, and Athena advises Telemachos to ask Nestor (who knew Odysseus) if he has heard anything about his father's fate.

> Then the thoughtful Telemachos said to her in answer:
> "Mentor, how shall I go up to him, how close with him?
> I have no experience in close discourse. There is
> embarrassment for a young man who must question his elder."
> Then in turn the gray-eyed goddess Athena answered him:
> "Telemachos, some of it you yourself will see in your own heart,
> and some the divinity will put in your mind. I do not
> think you could have been born and reared without the gods' will."
> So spoke Pallas Athena, and she led the way swiftly,
> and the man followed behind her walking in the god's footsteps.
> They came to where the men of Pylos were gathered in session,
> where Nestor was sitting with his sons, and companions about him

were arranging the feast, and roasting the meat, and [skewering] more portions.
These men, when they sighted the strangers, all came down together
and gave them greeting with their hands and offered them places.
First Peisistratos, son of Nestor, came close up to him
and took them both by the hands, and seated them at the feasting
on soft rugs of fleece there on the sand of the seashore
next to his brother Thrasymedes and next to his father.

(Homer 1967: 51–2)

This single excerpt provides examples of many of the strategies that oral cultures use to preserve and transmit ideas:

- *Verbal patterns, such as rhyme, rhythm, and formulas.* Ancient Greek oral poetry did not use rhyme, but it did use rhythm, usually called "meter" (not replicated in the translation). Verbal patterns may also appear in everyday speech. Maxims, for instance, often use parallel phrases that can be memorized almost immediately (e.g., "Early to bed, early to rise"). By putting words to music, a bard or "singer of tales" patterns language further, which can increase the retention of cultural knowledge. Set phrases or "formulas" serve a similar role. In *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, for example, one finds recurrent formulas such as "said to her in answer," "the gray-eyed goddess Athena" and "rosy fingered dawn."
- *Stereotypical characters, scenes, and stories.* Epithets such as "thoughtful Telemachos" and "resourceful Odysseus" highlight the fact that characters in oral cultures tend to be character types: the wise, the evil, the innocent, the furious, and so forth. Character types do not have personalities in the modern sense: they are not "deep" or inwardly complex, they do not possess intricate private lives, nor do they mature with experience. They are "flat" because their nature is outward and publicly defined – which they must be, in order to communicate something memorable that can be passed down through the generations as a tale. Similarly, there are "type scenes": standard events such as holding a feast or receiving a guest (in this excerpt, both), which can be adapted as needed.
- *Strong, strange, and symbolic imagery*. Character stereotypes such as those indicated by epithets condense personal traits down to one or two strong qualities that are readily remembered. Even more memorable than character types are strange and unnatural images, such as the many-armed Hindu goddess Kali, and Greek mythology's multi-headed monster Scylla. Although the excerpt above does not involve strange images, many appear elsewhere in *The Odyssey*, including Scylla. Such images may possess symbolic aspects: for example, Scylla probably represented a geographical location, since she is associated with the Strait of Messina between Italy and Sicily; Kali's arms and what each hand holds all have religious meanings. Symbolic elements make it possible for an image to pack a vast amount of knowledge, which one can recall by decoding the image's parts.
- *Narrative development through episodes*. Typically, long oral narratives consist of many episodes strung together. One event follows another without a necessary causal or logical connection, just an (actual or implied) "and then." As a result, one could skip Telemachos's visit to Pylos or the Cyclops episode in *The Odyssey* without radically harming the overall story of Odysseus. A narrative constructed from independent modules is easier to work with than a plotline having a closely knit causal sequence where skipping a scene could

render the story incoherent. Episodes also allow storytellers to adapt tales to the occasion, the audience, and the time available. However, sometimes stories follow a standard structure – another example of patterning to simplify the work of memory and communicating thoughts. One of the most common narrative structures involves three steps, often distinguished by the major characters (such as the "Three Little Pigs"), personal interactions (lovers meet, separate, and rejoin), or objects (porridge that's too hot, too cold, and just right).

- *Codified gestures, actions, and bodily movements*. Customary physical actions can mark an event as memorable, identify relationships among people, and enact a culture's understanding of relationships among people or between people and the rest of the world; often they accomplish all of these things at once. Examples of customary behaviors range from a bow upon meeting or a handshake that seals an agreement, to the use of beads (such as a rosary) to repeat prayers a set number of times, to welcoming ceremonies, to ritual performances involving chants, dances, offerings to gods or ancestors, contests, and other sorts of activities. Inviting a stranger to a feast and giving them pride of place, as happens in the passage above, is a "type scene" laden with moral and religious values regarding the treatment of guests, teaching the audience the culture's mores. Our embodied interactions with the world also give us ways of understanding it. For instance, human bodies are symmetrical, providing the opposition between left and right, and our sense of balance, which we apply elsewhere. Other contrasts include night and day, male and female, hot and cold, and so forth. Thus in oral culture, ideas and expressions often involve pairing one thing against another.

The techniques described above are only some of the features of oral communication, but they show that in order to preserve ideas, the structure of thought in oral culture must be very different from its structure in literate culture. But the difference does not lie simply in how one phrases language or constructs a story. Oral techniques orient an understanding of the world itself. Characters, for example, are not simply flat or externally oriented because that's the easiest way to transmit them through history: people are actually understood as being psychologically flat or outward. In Europe, people only start to have psychological "depth" at the close of the Middle Ages and particularly during the Renaissance. We will recount that history in Chapter 5. (To read more about how oral cultures interpret the world, see the essay "Ritual" on the *Theatre Histories* website.) Yet despite these crucial differences, verse, three-step narratives, codified behaviors, and other features of oral culture continue to play a role in human culture to the present. This is one example of the way that cultural elements connected to one mode of communication may endure when a new mode of communication arises.

Oral cultures vary in all sorts of ways, because many different social structures play a role in cultural development: economic systems, gender relations, political structures, religions, and more. But all oral cultures develop two major types of performance: storytelling and ritual. Whether they are the "origins" of theatre or part of its "raw materials," storytelling and ritual are part of the background of oral culture that fed into the development of theatre.

Storytelling and ritual in oral cultures

Storytelling occurs in all cultures throughout history. Most tales are brief, but some can be quite lengthy. Many ancient cultures produced extended epics, such as *Gilgamesh* (Sumeria,

eighteenth century BCE), *Mahabharata* (India, eighth or ninth century BCE), *Beowulf* (England, seventh century CE), *The Epic of King Gesar* (Tibet, twelfth century CE), and *Popol Vuh* (Central America/southern Mexico, date unknown). In an oral culture, everyone would be familiar with many of the stories that occurred in an epic and probably could link several together, but in some societies a few people learned numerous stories and made storytelling their vocation. Often these "cultural specialists" delivered their stories with musical accompaniment or in song. Storytellers could become highly skilled not only in recounting tales, but also in selecting episodes to suit the audience and occasion, improvising stories, and even commenting on current events. However, other societies did not develop the specialized role of storytellers; possibly their economy could not support even itinerant bards, or the shorter tales in their cultural repertory were sufficient for their needs.

An example of storytellers today is a notable group in western Africa (mainly in what is now Mali) known as griots (Figure 1.1). Griots could be male or female. The earliest reference to them was in 1352 CE, but they undoubtedly existed much earlier. "Storyteller" hardly begins to cover their numerous roles: sometimes described as bards or wordsmiths, they also served (and to some extent continue to serve) as historians, genealogists, praise-singers, advisors, spokes-persons, diplomats, mediators, interpreters, musicians, composers, teachers, and other social functions. While any adult can perform most of a griot's general activities, professional griots are more skilled, knowledgeable, and engaging. They also tell lengthier stories, some

Figure 1.1
Mali: this Zoumana hunter is also a fetisher and griot.
Source: © Hemis/Alamy.

exceptionally long. The longest recorded has almost 8,000 lines of verse; for comparison, *Beowulf* has roughly 3,200 lines, and *The Odyssey* has about 12,000 lines. The griots' epics have features shared by epics around the world – the requirements of this genre are very consistent, following the techniques described above (Hale 1998: 18–58, 135, 137).

Notably, storytellers usually present characters' dialogues not by enacting the characters, as an actor plays roles, but via quoted speech. For instance, in the scene from *The Odyssey* that we excerpted above, there are the phrases "the thoughtful Telemachos said to her in answer" and "Then in turn the gray-eyed goddess Athena answered him." The storyteller quotes what the characters said, rather than speaking as them. Sometimes the quoted speech is lengthy, such as when Odysseus recounts his voyage. Within his story, Odysseus himself quotes others' speech in the same manner. Only occasionally do storytellers directly speak as a character. Since the 1970s theatre has occasionally used quoted speech, but normally actors speak as the character. This is a significant distinction between storytelling and theatre. However, theatre shares storytelling's focus on narrative.

Along with storytelling, a crucial form of oral culture is ritual. Ritual is a form of performance that draws participants' minds to ideas and feelings that have special social (often religious) importance. Rituals are essential for preserving a culture's memory of its identity, character, and beliefs. Both oral and literate cultures have rituals; literate societies can accomplish many of the same ends in other ways, but they still have rituals. Rituals can honor spiritual beings such as gods, spirits, or ancestors; conduct a rite of passage to mark an important life change such as puberty, marriage, or death; affirm or create a relationship toward someone (e.g., to a king or a guest) or a social commitment (an oath, an agreement); spiritually purify a space, object, or person; demonstrate power; confer political office; and serve many other purposes.

There are varying interpretations of ritual's primary social function, such as building cohesion within a society, hiding or justifying oppressive social relationships by giving them supernatural explanations and meanings, or creating opportunities to negotiate and sometimes transform social relationships. Whichever function(s) ritual serves, most societies require cultural specialists to lead them. At one end of the spectrum are **shamans**, who mediate between humans and the spirit world, heal people, and know most of the culture's mythology and history – but often live like everyone else in the village. (Occasionally most of the villagers can perform some shamanic duties, so the degree of specialization can be slight.) At the other end of the spectrum, a distinct priestly class arises with high entrance requirements demanding years of preparation through chants and other practices.

Ritual interests many people who study theatre because of its performative, "theatrical" character. In contrast to storytelling, rituals may involve the impersonation or embodiment of deities, which is similar to the enactment of character in theatre; however, unlike both storytelling and theatre, rituals usually present or refer to very brief narratives, such as a single incident from a lengthy story already known to the participants. Rituals usually involve a special set of symbolic objects, words, or sounds (such as drumming), which create an element of spectacle. Often there are well-established rules of procedure or behavior, but sometimes the rules are loose, and ritual events can even provide a license to playfulness and misbehavior. The case study on Yoruba ritual presents an interpretation of the *Egúngún* masquerade highlighting the importance of play. As we will see, *Egúngún* also incorporates many of the discursive techniques of oral culture.

CASE STUDY: Yoruba ritual as "play," and "contingency" in the ritual process

Phillip B. Zarrilli

> Aiyé l'ojà, òrun n'ilé.
> ("The world is a market, the otherworld is home.")
> (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 2)

If this world is a market, and one's permanent residence is the otherworld, then life in this world is contingent and transitory. For the Yoruba, life in this world is a constant process of

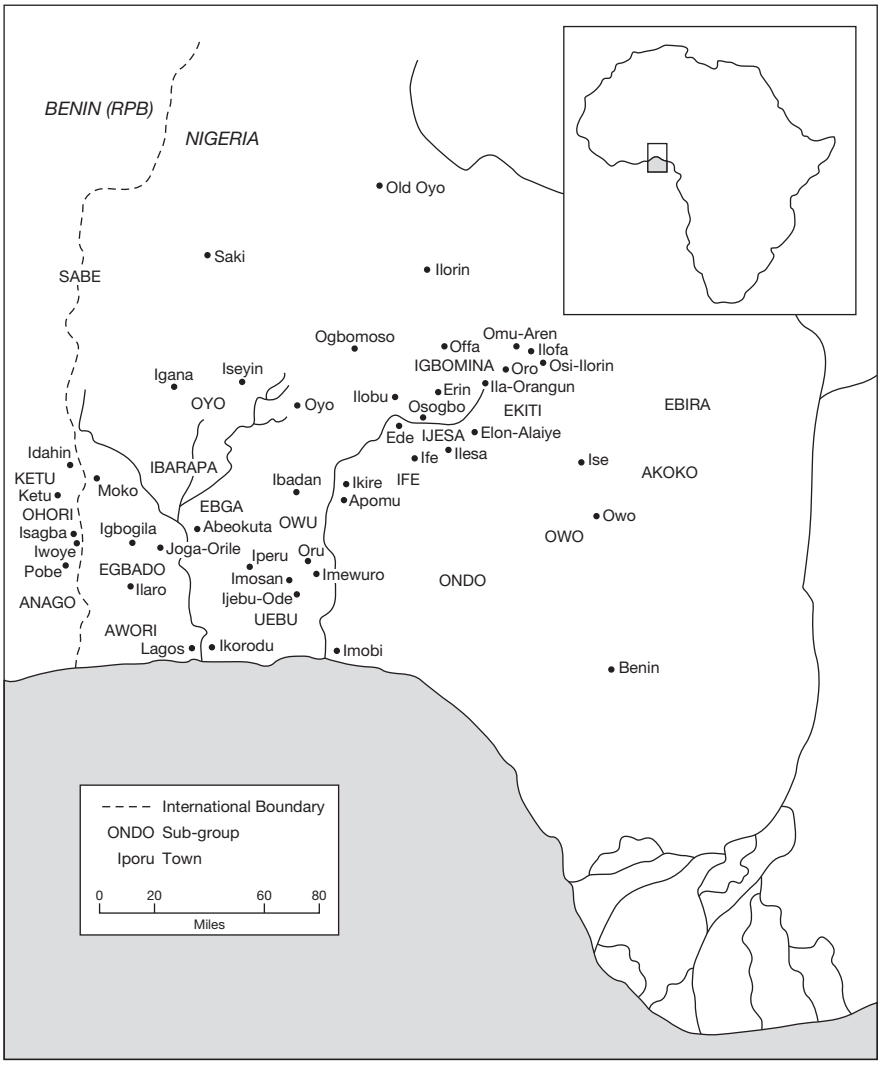


Figure 1.2
Map: The Yoruba of Nigeria and Benin, West Africa.

balancing or "playing" with and between opposing forces. The term "Yoruba" has been used only since the nineteenth century to identify a large, socially and culturally diverse set of subgroups speaking many dialects of Yoruba. The Yoruba peoples are spread across the coastal region of West Africa (Togo, Benin, and western Nigeria) (Figure 1.2). They are also in diasporic communities in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States.

Balance and symmetry (which, as we have noted, frequently appear in oral cultures) are central to Yoruba religion and are embedded in all aspects of Yoruba life – dance, speech, and ritual. Traditional Yoruba deities who have boundless energy and provoke action are classified as "hot," and must be counterbalanced by those who are "cool" – "whose strength is in the patience and gentleness they radiate" (Ajayi 1998: 38). Ésù, the capricious trickster god of the crossroads, and Orúnmìlà, the god of fate, are two opposites who complement one another, as reflected in the Yoruba's primordial creation myth. Dances of all types are informed by an aesthetic of balance and symmetry – in practice, a constant process of shifting between right and left. Indeed, Yoruba society does not expect rigid conformity, but "appreciates occasional lapses and personal idiosyncrasies" (Ajayi 1998: 29). This is also evidenced in the delight people take when engaging in both *èdà-òrò* (inverted discourse) and in the indirect handling of the "truths" of riddles and proverbs – a trait some Westerners ethnocentrically deride as "never straightforward" (Ajayi 1998: 31).

Some rituals are highly prescriptive in form, inviting absorption of ritual specialists in the intricacies of the repetition of highly codified scores. While all rituals have a structure, not all ritual structures possess a rigid score. Indeed, Yoruba ritual practices are founded on the transformative possibilities of ritual becoming a "journey" for its participants. Through ritual, deep learning may occur by "playing" in the moment.

The concept of Yoruba ritual (*ètùtu*) encompasses "annual festivals (*odún*), weekly rites (*òsè*), funerals (*ìsinkú*), divinations (*idafa*), and initiations and installations of all kinds" (Drewal 1992: 19). As Margaret Thompson Drewal explains, Yoruba say they go to "play" ritual, that is to say they spontaneously "improvise" dance steps or rhythmic patterns, and improvise through parody, elaboration, or invention. Some forms of improvisation are obvious, such as when the Yoruba incorporate in their *Egúngún* [EH-goon-goon] masquerade festival (described below) parodies of Western behavior or dress, using tuxedos or Second World War gas masks, for example.

Journey as a metaphor for this contingent life is embedded in all Yoruba ritual, as reflected in the final two lines of these verses by diviner Kolawole Ositola:

> We are going in search of knowledge, truth, and justice . . .
> We are searching for knowledge continuously.
> (Ajayi 1998: 33)

This is not a journey from predetermined point A to point Z, but rather a life-long processual journey of exploration and discovery through which consciousness is to be transformed.

Egúngún *masquerade spectacle*

The masquerade spectacle *Egúngún*, which honors the spirits of ancestors, is one of the many forms of Yoruba ritual. On publicly announced dates set by diviners, *Egúngún* festivals are organized by *Egúngún* societies and held in the open air in villages or towns annually,

THINKING THROUGH THEATRE HISTORIES

Theories of play and improvisation

In her study of Yoruba ritual, Margaret Thompson Drewal asserts that "playing is the power Yoruba actors exercise in transforming ritual itself, and indeed it may be more precise to say that ritual structures, or strategies, have no existence apart from the tactics, or play, of actors. It is in play that ritual's very efficacy resides" (Drewal 1992: 28). Here Drewal is counteracting many earlier anthropological accounts of ritual that overemphasize structure, convention, rigidity, and the role that "rules" play in the efficacy of ritual.

Drewal adopts an "actor-centered approach" focused on "the relationship between actors and the forms they operate on" (Drewal and Drewal 1983: xvi). She locates the "power" of ritual not in the structure, but in the active engagement of the individual "actor" within the experience of the structure as it is performed/practiced. Drewal emphasizes the way in which the Yoruba people situate the contingency of "playing" and improvisation as central to both their worldview and their engagement of ritual structures. Her analysis relates to the general theories of play as developed by sociologists Johan Huizinga (1970), Roger Callois (1979), and Brian Sutton-Smith (1997). Theories of play emphasize the enjoyment of engaging, stretching, and breaking rule-governed activities. Given its ephemeral mode of engagement "in the moment," this idea of "play" is usually lost in the writing of theatre histories. But the joy of "playing" or "attending to play" is central to the moment of both ritual and theatrical performance. An "actor-centered" approach to the study of performance histories necessarily will mean attempting to understand and interpret what cultural actors experience and how they engage in the moment of performance/practice.

biannually, or on the occasion of a funeral. Each occasion is unique, with great variation in the numbers and types of masked and unmasked performers that appear, in the order of performance, and in the type, range, and quality of audience engagement. During performances, the spectators' attention is drawn to what is happening in particular (often improvised) moments rather than to "repetition of a stock formal segment" (Drewal 1992: 93).

Egúngún begins at night in the center of the town when a spirit (Agan) "brings the festival into the world" (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 2). *Egúngún* society members invoke the elusive Agan into the world by using percussion instruments to simulate the "actual dynamic qualities" Agan possesses. He is likened to the "[small, quick, light, drizzling] . . . early night rain" (1983: 2–4). It is forbidden that anyone see Agan's entry into the world; therefore, all non-members must lock themselves in their houses as Agan is beckoned. The first rhythms played on the *bata* drum summoning ancestors or deities for this and other festivals are called *alùwási*, literally "drums come into the world."

Egúngún is an opportunity for the unseen ancestral spirits to visit. Performers are understood to possess *àse*, the "activating force or energy" (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 5), with "the power to bring things into existence" (Drewal 1992: 90). *Egúngún* performances weave together a series of equal, but quite different stylistic and thematic segments (modules), each of which has its own independent origin myth.

Figure 1.3
The masks worn in *Egúngún* are called *idan*, literally meaning "miracle." The "miracle" depicted here represents Gorilla, a character that figures significantly in *Egúngún* origin myths. Egbado area, town of Imasai, December 23, 1977.

Source: Margaret Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, p. 161, by kind permission of Indiana University Press.

These myths are available to the performance as source traditions, but each occasion of performance is a completely unique negotiation of that past with the present. Drewal witnessed the appearance of four maskers in a performance in the Nigerian town of Imasai, one of whom appeared as the Gorilla (*Inoki*), with "naturalistically carved wooden testicles and a penis painted red on the tip" (Drewal 1992: 93) (Figure 1.3). He represented a character that features significantly in the *Egúngún* origin myth in which a gorilla rapes Iya Mose, who thereby gives birth to a half-human, half-monkey child. The child eventually grows up to be "'One-Who-Brings-Sweetness' to the community" (Drewal 1992: 92). At this performance, Gorilla "sneaks up behind unsuspecting women in the performing space, raising his penis as if he is going to rape them" to the sound of the drums (*sabala-sabala-sa-o*) simulating the sounds of Gorilla's sexual movements. Because the attention of spectators was focused elsewhere, the Gorilla masker was able to catch out women in the audience, much to the amusement of the other spectators.

We can see the underlying creativity and sense of play informing Yoruba ritual in many other examples of improvisational intervention, especially when a segment of *Egúngún* is a competitive performance where individual skills and techniques are tested. So fluid is an *Egúngún* masquerade that master performers "continue to refine their skills," while "neophytes learn in plain sight of everyone" (Drewal 1992: 89). At the end of the festival, a spirit known as Aránta or Olodúngbódún "carries the spectacle back to the otherworld" (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 4). The playful improvisation at the heart of Yoruba practice points to an important dimension of many historical forms of ritual. It has allowed the Yoruba to creatively interact

with and respond to neighboring peoples by creating items such as the mask of the Hausa Meat Seller, or to changing historical circumstances, such as the introduction of Islam and European colonialism. The modern play *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) by Nigerian playwright and Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka (discussed in Chapter 13) incorporates *Egúngún* as part of his critique of European colonialism.

To read more about ritual and shamanic performance, see the essay "Ritual Places and Performances" and the case study "Korean Shamanism and the Power of Speech" on the *Theatre Histories* website.

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Performance in oral cultures with writing

Writing has a complex history and has taken a variety of forms. The basic systems are logograms, syllabaries, and alphabets. Logograms use a simple image or (frequently) an abstract symbol to represent a whole word, the way that ☼ means "sun" and the emoticon **;-)** means "wink." Syllabaries utilize a character for each syllable, phonetically, such as *ba* and *ta*. And alphabets give each individual speech sound its own letter, like *t* and *u*. We will discuss a few of these below, and we offer a more detailed discussion of the history of language and the invention of writing in the essay "Human Speech and Early Writing" on the website.

In societies where writing developed, it stimulated economic and cultural growth. In many cases, eventually it also transformed people's thinking processes and their methods of preserving knowledge. The extent, character, and rapidity of that transformation differed according to the context. In some societies, writing fostered new forms of performance such as theatre or something similar to it, providing distinctive ways of encountering myths, epics, or narratives. This section examines performance in two ancient societies which used writing but kept it restricted to a small group of people (generally rulers, scribes, and priests), often for limited purposes. Important as those individuals often were, their literacy had little significant impact on people outside the courts and temples. Our first example of performance in such a culture is the "Passion Play" of Abydos, Egypt, which may or may not have been theatre. The second is the Maya's *Rabinal Achi*, which in many respects seems to be a play. At the end of the chapter we will discuss performance in a society where writing was relatively widespread and used for numerous purposes: classical Greece.

The sequence of our discussion (Egypt, the Mayan Empire, Greece) does not signal progress or evolution. For example, there is no evidence that ancient Greek theatre had once been similar to the Abydos "Passion Play": clearly it had a different path of invention. Instead, we are looking at forms of performance in connection with the relationship between literacy and orality in three societies. Both Egypt and Mesoamerica used forms of writing that were difficult to learn, and literacy extended only to a small elite. In Athens, however, because Greece used the more assimilable alphabetic script, literacy spread far more widely than was possible anywhere else at the time. The differences between these societies' uses of writing had consequences for their development of performance.

The ancient Egyptian and Mayan societies had the strongest commonalities. Public life was organized around elaborate annual religious festivals featuring commemorative celebrations, rituals, and other performances, held on specific dates in the sacred calendar. Some of these performances were highly choreographed and were believed necessary for maintaining social, civic, and cosmic cohesion. The idea that performances could have such power is related to the nature of religion in these early societies, which was less a matter of personal faith than the duties and actions which the gods or spirits required in order to receive their due and keep the universe in balance. To the religions of oral cultures, voice and gesture – especially in ritual – are themselves powerful, a view that could extend to other types of performance.

Many early forms of drama or quasi-dramatic activities were part of commemorative religious ceremonies that celebrated or re-enacted a fundamental mythological, cosmic, or historical event, or a source of power. Commemorative ceremonies sometimes provided dramatic means of encountering a religious power or a past event in the present, reminding a community of "its identity as represented by and told in a master narrative . . . making sense of [its] past as a kind of collective autobiography" (Connerton 1989: 70). **Commemorative dramas** may be enacted to honor appropriate deities; to pacify cosmic or natural forces; to enhance communication with the divine; or to commemorate mythic, quasi-historical, or historical moments in the society's history.

Although great artistry and imagination may be involved in the creation of commemorative ceremonies, artistic merit usually isn't the primary goal. Rather, these works are performed to enhance the relationship of the community or the individual to the divine, or to achieve a ritual purpose. Nevertheless, some early types of formalized performance are highly sophisticated works of art, combining enactment, music or song, and dance or movement. They employ non-realistic modes of representation in acting, staging, and costuming (including masking and makeup) in order to depict larger-than-life figures, such as epic heroes, gods, and ghosts, and the boundaries between spectating and participating may be blurred. We will see additional examples of commemorative performance in Chapter 3, most of them in cultures more affected by literacy; here we will consider two that arose in the context of highly restricted literacy.

Commemorative ritual "drama" in Abydos, Egypt

The religious background

By 3000 BCE, Egyptian civilization had evolved a highly complex set of religious practices and beliefs. For well over 3,000 years, Egyptian religious and cultural life exhibited a tolerant

polytheistic openness to the worship of a spectacular array of many deities – gods and goddesses both old and new, local and foreign. Their myths and legends were often contradictory. Three distinct but interconnected accounts of creation existed, each focusing on a different group of deities and each considered equally valid.

As typical of oral cultures, dualities were fundamental to the Egyptian worldview, within which chaos was balanced by order. Life was associated with day and death with night. Their regular alternation demonstrated how the gods controlled the cosmos. The god Ra was both the lord of time and the sun-god who ruled the day. His counterpart was Osiris, ruler of death and the underworld. Death and life were not two different states, but two aspects of one state; therefore, life balanced death. The afterlife – an idealized version of Egyptian daily life – was an underworld (or in some versions, the sky) where the dead lived as eternally blessed spirits, transfigured both by their difficult journey to the afterworld and their final judgment by the great god, Osiris. The daily rebirth of the sun mirrored the constant rebirth of the dead in the afterlife. In the afterworld, Ra and Osiris became one. According to the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (a text used for funerals) "Osiris is yesterday and Ra is tomorrow."

Arguably the most important Egyptian myth is that of Osiris and his sister and consort, Isis. Before human-time, when Osiris and Isis ruled the world, prosperity and peace reigned. But Osiris's brother, Set, became jealous. He killed Osiris by sealing him in a coffin and drowning him in the Nile at a location near Abydos, thereby bringing conflict to the world. When Isis recovered Osiris's body, Set took the body from her, dismembered it, and scattered it over the far expanses of Egypt. Isis and her sister Nephthys (protectors and restorers of the dead), taking bird form, scoured the kingdom in order to reassemble Osiris's body. After Isis located every piece, with the help of other deities and fanning him with her wings she revived him. From their union was born their son, Horus, raised to avenge his father's death. Osiris left to become ruler of the afterworld.

This legend was central to Egyptian belief in the rebirth of the dead into an afterlife. In the Egyptian view, Set represented chaos and Horus the divine nature of kingship, always to be reborn. Osiris, the god who died and was restored to life, was associated with the annual flooding of the Nile, agriculture, and fertility.

The commemorative ritual of Osiris at Abydos

Cosmic equilibrium could be maintained only through the cooperation of the gods and goddesses. Chaos was kept at bay by the earthly representative of the gods – the pharaoh. As the intermediary between divine and mortal worlds, the pharaoh (male or female) possessed the inherent dualities of the cosmos. Only the pharaoh was empowered to intercede on behalf of humankind; therefore, s/he was considered the main priest of every Egyptian temple. The pharaoh was at first regarded as a servant of the gods, but later was considered divinely conceived and equal to the gods. While alive, the pharaoh was considered an incarnation of Horus, son of Osiris. When a pharaoh died, s/he was then identified with Osiris.

The elaborate ritual life of Egyptian temples was based on making offerings that nourished the gods: food, libations, song, dance, incense, and annual festivals. Before conducting daily worship or public ceremonies, priests and priestesses purified themselves by bathing, chewing mineral salts, and removing body hair. Song and dance were especially central to worship of Hathor, the goddess of music, motherhood, and beauty. One hymn describes how even the king danced and sang before the goddess while wielding a sacred, golden rattle:

He comes to dance,
comes to sing,
Hathor, see his dancing,
see his skipping!
. . . O Golden One,
how fine is the song
like the song of Horus himself,
which Ra's son sings as the finest singer.
He is Horus, a musician!
(Fletcher 2002: 83)

The Egyptian calendar featured numerous annual festivals, astrologically determined, during which statues of gods and goddesses were housed in sacred barques (boat-shaped shrines) (Figure 1.4). These barques usually were hidden from sight and were the subject of secret rituals inside temples. When they were taken in procession by land and water to visit other temples or burial tombs, the barques were carried out of the temple on the shoulders of priests and accompanied by dancers and musicians (Figure 1.5), making that deity's power present for the people.

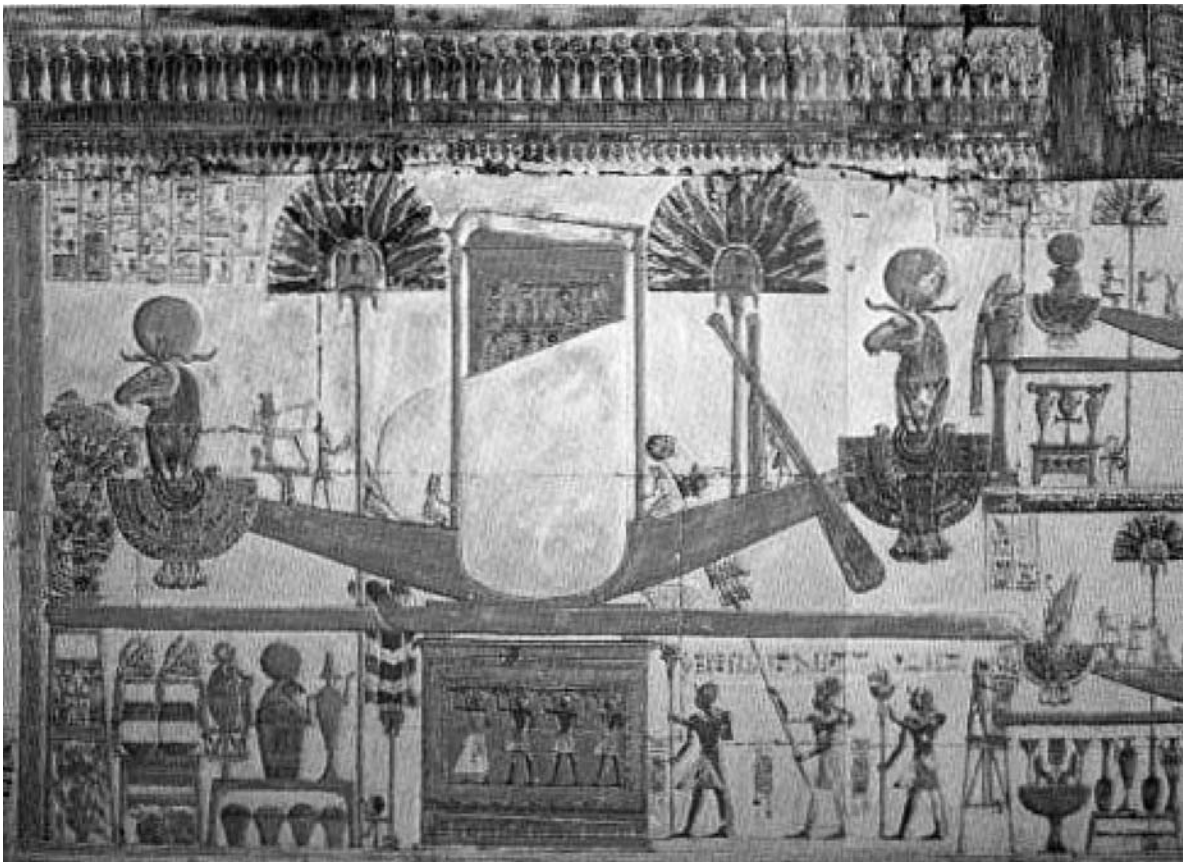

Figure 1.4
The sacred barque of Amun-Ra in a relief from a temple of Seti I.

Source: Joann Fletcher, *The Egyptian Book of Living and Dying* (London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2002), 103.

Figure 1.5
Fragment from a relief from a tomb at Sakkara (*c.*1250 BCE) showing women and young girls playing tambourines and clapsticks and dancing at a festival procession (right), led by a baton-carrying official and other male officials, their arms raised in rejoicing.

The deity most honored with great public ceremonies was Osiris, especially at the main center of his worship in Abydos during the period of the Middle Kingdom (roughly 2055–1640 BCE). Middle Kingdom rulers lavished patronage on the cult. Osiris's statue was re-housed in a new "everlasting great barque," constructed of "gold, silver, lapis lazuli, bronze, and cedar." Annually, the barque containing Osiris processed from the temple to the desert site of his tomb and back again. At the center of this liturgy, lasting days if not weeks, was a commemorative re-enactment of dramatic moments of Osiris's story.

The way in which Egyptians understood their place within the world and cosmos was informed by two suppositions: the assumption that society was organized around "high centers," headed by divinely ordained monarchs, and the assumption that cosmology and history were indistinguishable. Both assumptions are evident in the commemorative ritual for Osiris at Abydos (Figure 1.6).

All that is known about the quasi-dramatic ritual often called the Abydos "Passion Play" is the information inscribed on a single stele (a flat stone), dating from the rule of Senusret III (1870–1831 BCE). It provides a description of the dual roles of the chief priest/organizer of the festival, Ikhernofert, who was both overseer of the ceremonies and a participant/actor playing the role of the "beloved son of Osiris." The stele reads:

> I arranged the expedition of Wepwawet when he went to the aid of his father. I beat back those who attacked the Barque of Neshmet. I overthrew the foes of Osiris. I arranged the Great Procession and escorted the god [Osiris] on his journey. I launched the god's ship . . . I decked the ship with gorgeous trappings so that it might sail to the region of Peker [near Abydos]. I conducted the god to his grave in Peker. I championed [avenged] Wennefru [Osiris as the re-risen god] on the day of the Great Combat and overthrew all his adversaries beside the waters of Nedit. I caused him to sail in his ship. It was laden with his beauty. I caused the hearts of the Easterners to swell with joy, and I brought the gladness to the Westerners at the sight of the Barque of Neshmet.
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> (Gaster 1950: 41–2)