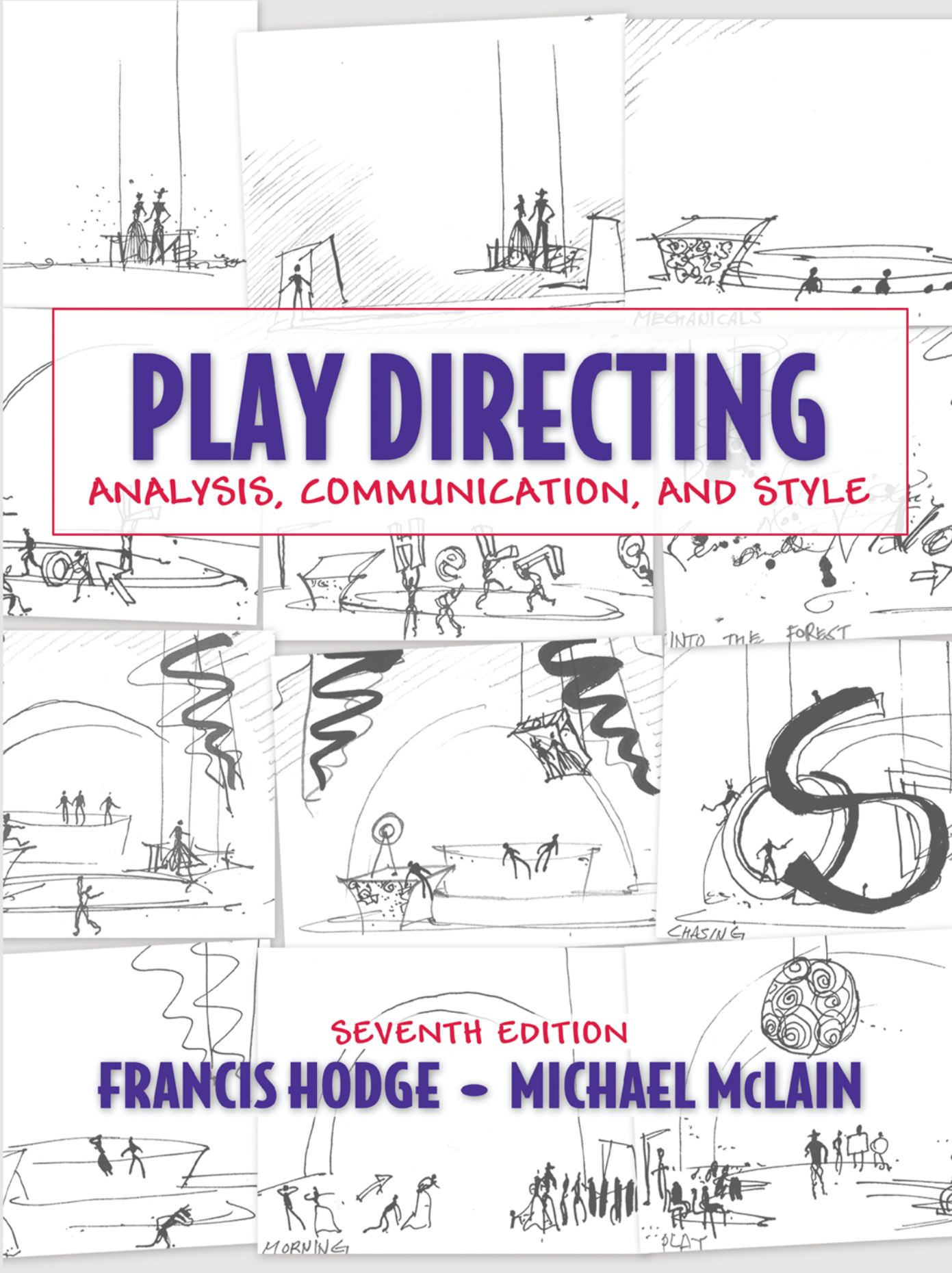

PLAY DIRECTING

ANALYSIS, COMMUNICATION, AND STYLE

SEVENTH EDITION

FRANCIS HODGE - MICHAEL McLAIN

Play Directing

Analysis, Communication, and Style

SEVENTH EDITION

Francis Hodge
University of Texas, Austin
Michael McLain
University of California, Los Angeles

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Dedication

This seventh edition of *Play Directing* is dedicated to the memory of Francis Hodge, who passed away in the Spring of 2008. Dr. Hodge's illustrious career as scholar, director, and educator spanned almost four decades at the University of Texas, Austin, where he inspired and trained generations of directing students, as well as many others whose lives he touched in the areas of acting, design, theatre technology, critical studies, and theatre education. All who had the privilege of studying under Dr. Hodge came away with a greatly expanded understanding of theatre as an art form and came to perceive theatre as a meaningful, demanding, and even noble way of life. The human experience—and the ability of theatre to reveal it—was always central to the values Dr. Hodge instilled in his students. Learning with Dr. Hodge meant coming to terms with the discipline, creativity, acquisition of craft, dedication, and rigorous standards essential to a life in the theatre. Indeed, in the presence of this magnificent teacher, superb director, and distinguished scholar, students from many backgrounds came to understand theatre and drama as essential human pursuits that are at the foundation of civilized society. The American theatre is greatly the richer for the many contributions of Francis Hodge over his long career. He will be greatly missed by all who were privileged to know him, but his work profoundly affected the lives of many and his influence will live on for generations yet to come.

Michael McLain
University of California, Los Angeles

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Preface

In preparing this seventh edition of *Play Directing*, the intention has been to develop more fully the exploration of the director-designer relationship in order to provide a firm foundation in this critically important aspect of directing. Two new chapters have been added to address this goal and in other chapters where the role of the director in the design process is treated, many points have been expanded upon or clarified. The illustrations have also continued to be updated from the sixth edition with this in mind. A number of the exercises have been expanded or changed, and it is hoped that those who are committed to learning to direct will take the time to work through as many of the exercises as possible.

As with previous editions, appreciation and gratitude go to the many students, both undergraduate and graduate, whose determination to learn this wondrous and ever fascinating craft has been nothing short of inspirational. In this age of ever increasing media in all aspects of our lives, a new generation of students seeking the transcendent experience that can come with live performance has been sustaining and has reinforced the belief that young people will always be able to imagine—and seek—that which live theatre alone can provide in our lives. Also, sincere gratitude is due to the users of this book who have offered comments and suggestions for its improvement: the care with which these thoughts have been articulated has been inspiring, as well. Finally, to the reviewers of this edition: Paul Kuritz, Bates College; Karen Libman, Grand Valley State University; William Partlan, Herberger College of Fine Arts; and Daniel Yurgaitis, Northern State University, many, many thank-you's to each of you for your contribution to making *Play Directing* an even better book.

Credits for Photographs and Groundplan Figures

Each photograph is credited here in the order of its use with the following notation: number of the photograph; title of the play and its author; specific director, designer, photo credit, and the place of production.

1. *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (Bertolt Brecht); director, Heinz-Uwe Haus; University of Kansas.
2. *Idiot's Delight* (Robert Sherwood); director, Francis Hodge; set design, Laszlo Funtek; costumes, Ilse Richter; Banff School of Fine Arts, Banff, Canada.
3. *Hair* (Rado, Ragni, and McDermott); director, Mel Shapiro; scenery, Emily Philips; costumes, Jeannique Prospère; lighting, Jane Hall; University of California, Los Angeles; photograph by Craig Schwartz.
4. *Oliver!* (Lionel Bart); director, Margaret Elizabeth Becker; scenery, Gerhardt Arceberger; costumes, Karen Hudson; lighting, Alfred Stanley; Zachary Scott Theatre Center, Austin, Texas.
5. *Saint Joan* (George Bernard Shaw); director, Francis Hodge; scenery, Clayton Karkosh; costumes, Paul Reinhardt; University of Texas, Austin.

6. *True Love* (Charles Mee, Jr.); director, Michael McLain, co-director, Brian Kite; scenery, Daniel A. Ionazzi; costumes, RoseMarie Fabiano; lighting, Jane Hall; University of California, Los Angeles; photograph by Craig Schwartz.
7. *Orestes 2.0* (Charles Mee, Jr.); director, Michael McLain, co-director, Brian Kite; scenery, Daniel A. Ionazzi; costumes, RoseMarie Fabiano; lighting, Jane Hall; University of California, Los Angeles; photograph by Craig Schwartz.
8. *Curse of the Starving Class* (Sam Shepard); director, Michael McLain; scenery, Rich Rose; costumes, Miye Matsumoto; lighting, Joanne T. McMaster; University of California, Los Angeles.
9. *Look Back in Anger* (John Osborne); director-designer, Mark Ramont; University of Texas, Austin.
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26. *Doctor Faustus* (Christopher Marlowe); illustration of open staging; director, Francis Hodge; scenery, John Rothgeb; University of Texas, Austin.
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29. *Book of Days* (Lanford Wilson); director, Wendy C. Goldberg; scenery, Michael Brown; costumes, Annie Kennedy; lighting, Nancy L. Schertler; Arena Stage, Washington, D.C.
30. *Noises Off* (Frayn); director, Nigel Bennett; scenery and lighting, Neil Peter Jampolis; costumes, Patrick Clark; Atlantic Theatre Festival, Wolfville, Nova Scotia.
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67. *The Crucible* (Arthur Miller); director, Francis Hodge; scenery, Laszlo Funtek; Banff School of Fine Arts, Banff, Canada.
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77. *Doctor Faustus* (Marlowe); director, Francis Hodge; scenery, John Rothgeb; costumes, Paul Reinhardt.
78. *The Beaux Strategem* (George Farquhar); director, Francis Hodge; scenery, John Rothgeb; costumes, Lucy Barton; University of Texas, Austin.
79. *Ashes* (David Rudkin); Director's response collage by Richard Martinez; University of California, Los Angeles.

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52. Arena groundplan for *Everything in the Garden* by Edward Albee; director, Michael McLain; scenery, Rich Rose; University of California, Los Angeles.
53. Festival Stage of Atlantic Theatre Festival, Wolfville, Nova Scotia; architect, Michael Harvey, harvey ARCHITECTURE, Halifax, Nova Scotia; demonstration Elizabethan scenic arrangement by Neil Peter Jampolis; by kind permission of Michael Harvey and Neil Peter Jampolis.

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1

Why the Director?

This book is about leadership—specifically, the leadership of an artistic enterprise: the play director in today's theatre. Although there is a brief discussion of doing musical theatre and opera in Appendix 1, the concentration throughout the basic text is on work with plays as the oldest (2,500 years) continuing form of live theatre in Western culture. When you are a director, on some days you might think of yourself as a football coach, managing a team and calling in plays from the sidelines; on other days, you might see yourself as a conductor of an orchestra, emphasizing and blending the sounds made by the violins, horns, and drums in front of you. But most of the time, you will see yourself as a *leader* (not a dictator) of multiple craftsmen, all with individual skills who are open to the energy of new ideas.

As you look at the table of contents you should note that the process of directing set out here has two major approaches: First, Chapters 1 through 22 and Chapters 30 and 31 are all about the *mechanics* of bringing a play alive on a stage. Second, Chapters 23 through 29 are about *refining those mechanics* through the study of style in the playscript and in production so as to individualize your own approaches and make both the play and the production work on the stage. Some inexperienced directors find the prospect of working with style in production so attractive that they plunge right in without mastering the mechanics. Don't let this happen to you: Don't run before you can walk. Making a play's production *your own thing* can wait on an explicit understanding of the mechanics; merely reading through the text is not sufficient. That is why each section of the mechanics has its exercises. Do them seriously, and they will move you from a general approach in a play's production to specific ways to illuminate and individualize it.

Although this book is about the process of directing, it is also intended for playwrights, actors, and designers, for it is their work that the audience sees and hears. The director may give them the circumstances to express their fullest, most creative talent, and the director may help shape what they create, but unless these individuals know about and work as active collaborators toward the goals set by a director for a particular production, they will merely be carrying out mechanical projects. The over-arching goal is always synthesis, and by working together under the director-coordinator, these members of the truly collaborative group will find it.

This text is also written for those directors who make productions at the high school level. After all, there is no part-way point in this study of directing—that is, less for the beginners, more for the others. Directing is directing: You either know how to do it or you

don't. Once you learn something of the whole process, you will see how it can be applied at all levels of production—beginner, intermediate, advanced, and even professional. What you bring to it from your previous study of dramatic literature, your basic courses in design, your acting classes, and doing plays in production has already called extensively on your imagination. With directing you are about to embark on one of the theatre's most specific and demanding areas of study. Yet the intention throughout the text is not that of selling a *system*—that is, a specific and correct way of doing things; rather, the goal is to provide an intense look at the *structure* of plays, of acting and actor-ownership, and all the other crafts that make a produced play. When you understand the whole, you can devise your own individual, creative approach. This study about directing, then, is a format for discovering the process, not a rule book to be followed. Once you perceive directing as an enlightened form of leadership of others in the creative process, you will be liberated to undertake your own creative ways and not be tied up in a too limited way of doing your job.

The Director's Job

You will also note as you proceed in this study that directors have four drives that guide all their work: a *vision* of the play that can dominate all the aspects of production from acting to staging; a *comprehensive knowledge* of the dynamics of plays—their rises and falls, their louds and softs, their slow beats and their fast ones; *skills in communication* that can help actors and designers give their most creative attention to a play; and a very *strong desire to entertain* audiences by exciting their minds, their hearts, and their spirits.

It is precisely because the director has so much power in the theatre that so much is expected in return. The curious paradox is that, like the playwright, the director is not actually seen *on* the stage but only *through* the actors and the physical staging provided by the designers. In contrast, symphony and opera conductors, and even football coaches, have a physical presence. They visibly run the performance, with the obvious capability of directly affecting coordination, rhythm, and mood. But the director's work can be measured fully only through the reaction of an audience when they experience the work of the actors and designers. The director is a communicator whose *primary work is done through* actors and designers who then transmit ideas and energies to the audience.

The director's job, then, is to be a communicator of the highest order. The director may have very strong feelings about a playscript, but feelings, though they will help, will not define the would-be director's directing capabilities. Because the transfer of ideas must be made through the minds and feelings of others, the challenge for a director lies in the talent for touching the wellspring of feeling in others with what the director so vividly imagines and feels.

This challenge is the director's paradox. All artists operate within some balance of their subjective-objective selves, but it is the subjective that customarily dominates. The director is an exception, for most of the work is done on the conscious side of the scale. Herbert Blau in *The Impossible Theatre,* a stimulating and soul-searching study of the director's function, contends that "the director must be a brain." This statement does not mean that the director works only in a coldly objective, intellectual way. What it does mean is that *directors must trust their feelings to react primitively and vigorously to what they help make on the stage.* As a kind of practicing critic in the theatre, the director must constantly bring *what he or she feels and thinks to the surface* so that it can be communicated readily to others. The director must perceive, evaluate, make a diagnosis, and devise

remedies. The director's effectiveness in all these actions will lie precisely in finding this objective-subjective balance. To accomplish this balance, the learning director must become aware of the structures of plays, the prevailing theories and the training processes of acting, the physical use of the stage, and the visual and aural capabilities of design, for at the base, the director is the total designer of a production, someone who matches concrete form with imagined ideas.

As all artists must, the director must first be an adventurous spirit eager to find new paths and be capable of "soaring" on the level of the dramatic poet. (Even plays of everyday reality have a poetic dimension which contains their poetic vision or essential truth.) Too often, the director is regarded as only an interpreter of the creative works of others; yet if the director cannot reach some of the same heights as those achieved by the poet he or she is attempting to reveal on the stage, the directorial function is not fulfilled. The stage is a flying machine that must be manipulated with the greatest skill. By knowing the capabilities of theatre as an art form, the director will know which way freedom lies and thus be able to lead others to it. Flight-in-restriction is the goal.

Captivating Audiences

You must never forget that the director's leading purpose is to entertain—but this can mean dozens of things. Here's the paradox, though: A good director does not make "entertainment" the primary goal, for it is *how* the director entertains that matters. Perhaps better terms than the word entertain are to captivate an audience by getting their involuntary attention, or to *turn them on* with their capacities for empathy and *involvement*. This is the sort of attention audiences give despite themselves. It is what you as a director do to members of an audience that makes them sit on the edge of their seats.

Because of the direction taken in much of film and television today, we seem obsessed with violence as entertainment in itself. What makes good plays, however, is not *how* people are killed, but *why*. A shootout with the evil ones destroyed and the virtuous surviving, as we often see in popular "entertainments," tells us relatively little. Remember, good plays—and there are many more that are bad than good—are made of different stuff. You will discover early on how easy it is to entertain superficially, but how difficult it is to make good theatre.

Learning directing, as with any craft, is a process of personal discovery—doing basic things over and over until they become second nature. How long the learning process will take is a matter of your capability in perceiving concepts, in getting the message in a very personal way in a process of self-discovery. The artist in you will do the rest. The old saying "Life is short and art is long" is true only because artists have been challenged greatly by the demands of their jobs, and then have gone beyond themselves in making art that survives. If you want to be a director—the artistic leader of others in the theatre—you must learn it all.

EXERCISES

1. **Did you notice how *theatre* is spelled here? Back in the nineteenth century, dictionary-maker Noah Webster dumped the word into a general category of words like "center" and gave it an *-er* ending, the ending most U.S. publishers have used ever since. But despite this, those who make theatre, especially in New York, have retained the old spelling because of all its special meanings and historical attachments. *Theatre* is a term**

that connotes heritage, traditions, conventions, public and private communications, mirror images—both visual and aural—great ideas, memorable characters, perceptive sentiments, live audiences, live actors, and much more. Which spelling do you think you will use?

2. How does live theatre, then, differ from the electronic media of television and motion pictures beyond the simple fact that it is live? Is there something to be had in theatre that can't be gotten elsewhere?
3. Compare the experience of a theatre performance with that of a religious ceremony. Can you envision the stage director as a "maker of ceremonies" rather than the customary designation of "coordinator" of entertainment? Explain your answer.
4. Why can a director be described as a ritualist who makes rituals?
5. Why is live theatre more of a "belonging" experience than watching television or a movie?
6. Is theatre a social institution? How so? Are there other such social institutions you could compare it to? How is theatre like and not like a library in a community?
7. Why do you want to direct plays? Make a list of the reasons why and share it with your teacher and others in the class. Discuss these reasons with your group.

2

What Is a Play?

Analysis and Improvisation

The playscript is the director's primary tool. If you don't know what it is in all of its parts, you will be lost. Treating it with respect is knowing your job at its most fundamental.

Do you know how to read a play? Most people don't, but go at it by reading the words, as in any other kind of reading, and being caught up in the "story." A director, however, reads a play in a quite different way, paying attention to all the starts and stops, the gaps, the silences, and the bare minimum of description. Furthermore, the director is aware that it is all dramatic action. As a director, all of this sparks your imagination, and what is eventually done by the acting and the design begins to emerge in the mind. The makers of these special stories were called play*wrights* with the understanding that a play is made, just as other craftsmen make ships (shipwright) or wheels (wheelwright). The product of the playwright or dramatist, to be sure, is not nearly so concrete, for he or she is a conscious dreammaker, as Shakespeare says, who can, with the appropriate use of basic tools, stir up minds and create imaginative flights in others—the audience.

The unique characteristic of the playwright's making, the thing that differentiates it from other writing, is that the playwright's "dream-flight," the *improvisation* that takes shape within the writer's mind, has to take into account not only vocal and visual instruments (the actors) but also the place where the audience gathers to hear and watch the story—the theatre or stage. The playwright is a rare artist because what is put down on paper is not writing in the usual sense—that is, writing intended for reading in solitude by one person at a time—but is the making of a thing that involves live *actors* and *objects* set out in a specific way for seeing and hearing *by a group* meeting together in an act of sharing. What the playmaker leaves out—the gap for the actors to fill in—is usually as important as what is written. French actor-director Jean-Louis Barrault described a play as "interrupted silence." This concept moves us entirely away from thinking about a play as a literary product, *as merely conversation written down,* for we see it is far more difficult to leave out than to put in. Many celebrated novelists and poets have tried unsuccessfully to make "interrupted silences"—plays—but they abandoned these efforts, or audiences forced them to, when they discovered that they didn't have the know-how to devise this sort of skeletal improvisation. Nor did they know what to do with a live audience.

You should not be at all surprised to learn that such famous playwrights as Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Molière were actors, and often directed their own plays. Today, a playwright also hears the words in his or her imagination and sees the action in the mind's eye when composing a play. But with the emergence of directing as a specialized craft in the late nineteenth century, relatively few dramatists in our time also direct (with notable exceptions, such as Harold Pinter, who was also an actor). The total thing that emerges from the playwright's imagination is a dramatic poem, a unique kind of writing that works on an audience by arousing its emotions directly. *The process is physical and disturbing,* and it is only *secondarily intellectual,* though the experience requires a perceptive intelligence—which is not quite the same thing. When it works, it reaches out to grab and thrill; it can cause tears and laughter, chills and anger; it can also drain members of an audience as well as exalt them. Its powers are mystical and deeply affecting. We can retain a well-performed play in our minds for years in the same way that we hold onto a deeply felt personal experience, because characters in plays can seem like people of many years' acquaintance.

Perception: Play-Analysis

Many people in the theatre shy away from the phrase *play-analysis* because they think it has a dry, academic ring that implies cold, factual, scientific examination of a playscript, a process that will kill their imaginative (subjective) responses to it. They assume that good theatre can be made only if one *feels* strongly enough about a playscript; good sense and some general background in theatre will carry one the rest of the way. This book does not agree at all with that point of view. Certainly, there are aspects of many plays that cannot be described easily in words, but this difficulty does not suggest that a play exists in a way that defies logical, thoughtful examination. Having the right attitude about play-analysis at the beginning is very important.

The word *perception* has specific meanings here because it can imply both strong feelings (the subjective flight and freedom in a director) and a basic objective awareness of how a play is made. It implies much more than a felt reaction on a first reading: "I like that play. It moves me strongly." Perception implies that a penetrating search into a play—play-analysis—is absolutely necessary if one is to understand how a play works.

What a director finds in play-analysis will depend on how thoroughly he can take a play apart in his own mind and then put it back together again, completely comprehended. Perception is the director's total view of a playscript after "feeling" it and then examining its structure in detail. If the director's feelings are strong on the first reading, and he knows the job of play-analysis, he cannot help but have much greater respect and admiration for a play after analysis than before.

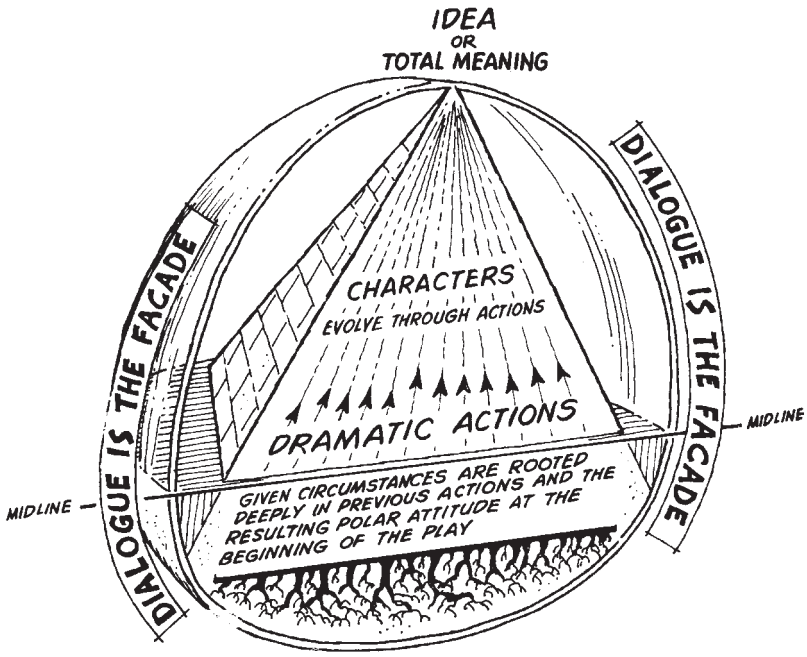
Play-analysis, then, is the director's objective support *for his feelings* about a playscript *and his imaginative responses to it*. As a technique, it is tied to the idea that directing is not a totally intuitive process but is also an art-creating process in which the director, in evolving a production, brings the structural elements of a playscript to the conscious surface where they inform the choices and decision making that occur. In other words, the director becomes *consciously* aware of the materials in the interest of finding their strengths and weaknesses, their peaks and valleys, and their rhythms, all of which will serve as a basis for theatricalizing the playscript in the best possible way. Adequate play-analysis is no guarantee of success, but it does ensure that the director understands, as much as is humanly possible at the outset of a process, this basis for his or her own feelings and all that is yet to come.

Overview of Play-Analysis

Study the following drawing carefully. It is a summary of what you will be investigating not only in Part I on play-analysis but also in Parts II and III as you work at putting a play on stage.

You should note in the drawing the five major areas to examine in taking a play apart: (1) given circumstances, (2) dialogue, (3) dramatic action, (4) characters, and (5) idea. Not seen in the drawing are rhythmic beats: (6) tempos and (7) moods. Although this breakdown is arbitrary for the purpose of discussion, you should recognize at the outset that these areas overlap, as the drawing illustrates, and that some of these areas are so thoroughly dependent on others that they do not take shape until the force of the others begins to happen. Other words might be used to define the same concepts, but this paradigm, when fully delineated, greatly helps a director's understanding of dramatic structure. Basic communication in textbooks rests on clear definition of the terms used. Therefore, you must recognize at this point that play-analysis in this book is based on the meanings given to the terms here and in the following chapters. For the purpose of discussion, the seven areas are treated in three chapters: Chapter 3, "The Foundation and Façade of the Playscript: Given Circumstances and Dialogue;" Chapter 4, "The Core of the Playscript: Dramatic Action and Characters;" and Chapter 5, "Idea and Rhythm-Mood Beats."

Each of these terms stands for a concept. Merely to define them is not to understand them. As in acting, *doing* in directing will lie not in defining terms or in debating concepts but in absorbing them so thoroughly that you recognize them in all contexts.



A graphic representation of dramatic structure. Note the midline: A play begins here, recapturing the past and moving forward to the present.

You must discover for yourself the breadth and depth of these concepts so that they become an intuitive part of your thinking about a play. In the discussions of the seven areas, the terms are first defined and then developed as concepts. Some examples are given to illustrate each step in this technique, but your comprehension will come about only through application of the approach to specific plays. There is no skipping around in this procedure. Try to understand and apply the concept of one term before you go on to the next. The series of seven is developed in order to show how each draws on what precedes it.

At first, you will be tempted to push aside the in-depth examination of these concepts. After all, simple impression—"I *feel* it this way"—is much easier. But if you proceed in this fashion, you will soon discover that you really do not know much about the inside workings of a play and that you do not really know *how to get through to actors.* Once you have mastered the techniques outlined here, you will feel a security you have not known previously, for you will know your primary tool—the playscript—in depth.

Story versus Play-Analysis

Another problem usually confronting learning directors in their first contacts with play-analysis is the difference between the playscript as story and the structure of that story. The story of a play is made up of so many things so well blended together that an unoriented reader merely experiences its final effect: its moods and its feelings. But through play-analysis, the director can get at what makes those moods and feelings. Thus, she can have greater assurance of getting the most out of her actors and in moving audiences. Your awareness of play structure, then, will give you the foundation for all that can happen later when you put a play into production.

EXERCISES

1. Discuss all the parts of the following premises of this book:
   a. A play is a symbolic device using live actors on a stage and a live audience for showing human beings caught in reciprocal tension and conflict.
   b. Directing is the process of revealing the conflict by coordinating and enhancing the work of live actors with that of designers in order to communicate a single vision of a play to a live audience.
2. What is a dramatic poet? Why is a modern writer of drama in prose also a dramatic poet? How does a play differ from a novel or a history?
3. Without getting involved in the complexities of the differences between serious drama and comedy, why is the writer of comedy also a dramatic poet?
4. The director is an image-maker. What is an image? Cite images for each of the five senses.
5. From your knowledge of acting and designing, can you see how an audience perceives a play through images? What is the process of transfer?

A Suggested Study Plan for Parts I and II

To coordinate all the new words and phrases you will be introduced to in the following chapters, and to learn more about play-analysis, two tools are suggested at this point: a class study play and the process of improvisation. Both are ways of helping you discover what goes on in plays.

A. The Play Choice as a Tool

A one-act play of high quality should be selected by your class, or the instructor. One suggestion is J. M. Synge's 1904 classic *Riders to the Sea.* (*Riders* is a Realistic play with a style some may reject as old-fashioned. Realism is far from dead, however. It has been a dominant style in the theatre since Ibsen's day and is still the dominant style you see in motion pictures and television drama. Those who would neglect the study of Realism and long to make theatre stand on its own fail to see how the "new" is always tied to the old in an ever-changing form.) *Riders* is so well put together, so well constructed, that it has withstood a century of picking apart while still retaining things to wonder about. It has survived because it is a dramatic poem of true stature and profound meaning. At first, it may seem simple to you, but you will be looking at the outside, not the inside. If you are to understand much about the changes playwrights came to make in the twentieth century and now in our time with styles of writing that depart from Realism, you must take apart a Realistic play—a play that looks like life as it is observed—and reassemble it fully understood; otherwise, you will get lost in disassembling those that are not Realistic. Save those until later.

To offset what may seem old-fashioned about *Riders,* your class may want to look regularly at one or two other plays, chosen from later periods, to act as "control" plays. One of those might be a one-act play by Tennessee Williams, written during the 1940s or 1950s, and the other a one-act play by Edward Albee or Sam Shepard. Can you see how they differ from *Riders*? Don't let your enthusiasm to direct recent plays kill off what you must learn now about the structure of all plays. Once you understand the principles of play-analysis, and something about Realism, you will be able to disassemble all kinds of plays, including musicals and operas, and make them work for you on the stage. The theatre will wait for you, but it will not want you if you don't know what is going on there.

B. Improvisation as a Tool

In this book, the technique of *improvisation* is suggested throughout as a classroom work method. In its early uses, improvisation was thought of primarily as training for the actor, but as its values and possibilities became more apparent, it was used not only in actor training and rehearsal, but also as a basis for playmaking. Consequently, not only have a number of experimental motion pictures been made by using this approach, but the live productions of the Open Theatre and the Living Theatre in the 1960s, and others since then, showed us that fresh and original productions could also be developed through this technique.

A play's written text is the form that has resulted from a series of improvisations that have been played out, developed, and refined as part of the imaginative, creative process in the playwright's mind. Subsequent interpreters of the play, including directors, designers, and actors, must be able to perceive and then release that master improvisation captured in

the play's text—release it to new life in a theatrical production. To do this, it is important for directors and all the creative collaborators to develop improvisation skills in their own work and to perceive how form ultimately arises from this fertile aspect of the creative process. Each member of the collaborative creative team goes through a series of improvisations in the development of the production, whether in the give and take of director-designer collaboration or the interplay of directors and actors in rehearsal.

The director is therefore an improvisor of the first order. In this sense, he is very close to the playwright who turns his dreams into forms—all controlled improvisations. The director is forever a game-player, always improvising, always making up spontaneously what seems appropriate and believable in a given circumstance but grounded in the play which he is to interpret, releasing the master improvisation written down and then shaped by the playwright in the "wrighting" process.

You will note as you work through this book that many of the exercises require improvisation. If you have participated in such game playing, you will already know that improvising can make something very much like a play, but it is not a play at all, only an exercise in releasing imagination. The overall intention is to free those persons who play the game—to let them "fly." But in order to do so, several conditions are necessary. Here are a few that must guide you when doing improvisations:

1. The participants are not actors; that is, they are neither acting out a portion of a playscript nor are they performing for an audience. Their intention is to *release each other* through full concentration on each other and the situation. Although some given circumstances may be set before an improvisation begins, the participants "work off" one another, with their imaginations dictating what to do in a certain context. There is no preplan of action. What happens will happen only as participants let their behavior, in reaction to other forces (other people in the same improvisation), be the result of their responses.
2. The watchers are not the audience. They are privileged to be there when the improvisation takes place. Therefore, they must not participate like an audience, but should watch silently and quietly with no verbal reactions whatsoever, because this would break the "happening" by distracting the participants, thus making them self-conscious. Once the participants become self-aware, the improvisation is lost because they have become themselves and not participants in an imagined circumstance.
3. The place to develop an improvisation is not a stage nor any location that would resemble it, because the artificial nature of this kind of setting would cause the improvisers to feel self-conscious. For this reason, this game should be played in a room, with the space defined only by what the improvisers find necessary.
4. Only the beginning of an improvisation should be suggested. What happens afterward is the improvisation.

It is obvious that a good deal that is playlike can happen in improvisations if the participants and watchers observe the conditions. You can see characters in action, with different moods and tempos, and, as a watcher, you can be moved by the truth telling and believability of such moments. But you must also realize that "achieving" a complex improvisation is not easily accomplished unless you have participants with experience in playing this game, because learning to release fully takes practice. In working through the exercises in this book, you must always give yourself seriously and with full concentration to improvisational exercises. If you do, you will find them most rewarding.

EXERCISES

1. Illustrate the difference between *restriction* and *flight* by doing the following improvisation: With the use of chairs, tables, or other essentially neutral forms in the classroom, compose a four-sided place. The class then tries to guess the *literal* place suggested by the forms and their arrangement by identifying the literal meaning of each form—such as a chair, a bed, a sofa—in the context of other forms. When a consensus has been reached on the literal meaning, the class suggests *alternate meanings* for the forms, with the intention of arriving at more exceptional locations and contexts. Thus, what might at first seem to be a normal living room could be turned into the mountain hideout of a terrorist or a peasant's hut. Repeat this game with several improvised places. The "flight" takes place as class members move away from accepted literal meanings of forms in their easily recognizable contexts—their own everyday realities—and begin to let the forms generate imagined places. Thus, *forms become the stimulators of flight,* not hard realities. (*Note:* This exercise is not that of making a groundplan for a stage, so do not set up the places with a stage in mind but only as places that could exist in real life anywhere.)
2. Continue Improvisation Exercise 1, arranging a place and then setting in it two people who have a specific relationship to each other, such as mother/son, boss/assistant, man/woman. The class tries first to determine the literal place and its context; it then tries to identify possible "flights" by suggesting more exceptional places and relationships of the people.
3. Continue Improvisation Exercise 2 by having the students in the improvisation *develop a conflict* by using numbers, not words, as dialogue. Example: *A* says: 1, 2, 3, 4; *B* says: 9, 10, 20; *A* says: 2, 3, 6, 7; *B* says: 4, 7, 9, 10. In this substitute for dialogue, the numbers do not mean anything in themselves, but the attitude behind each group of numbers is the basic meaning behind the line. (The use of actual words in improvisations is difficult for participants because they must think in terms of word choice. Number dialogue is easier because participants need think only of their attitudes toward other people in the improvisation.) When the improvisers reach an intensity of interaction, the improvisation can be stopped and the following points discussed:
   a. What is improvisation?
   b. What are the free circumstances of an improvisation?
   c. How was this improvisation like a play and yet not a play?
   d. What is a play? (Try defining it as an expert and highly developed improvisation.)
   e. What did the participants add to the suggested beginning of the improvisation?
   f. What are the limitations in the use of number dialogue?

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Part I

Taking a Play Apart

Play-Analysis: The Director's Primary Study

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3

The Foundation and Façade of the Playscript

Given Circumstances and Dialogue

After you have read the following pages, you will understand why the title of this chapter is "The Foundation and Façade of the Playscript." All you need to understand at this point, however, is that given circumstances and dialogue *frame* the play, just as deeply rooted pilings and a covering of glass and steel frame a modern skyscraper. The given circumstances resemble the deeply rooted base of a building—the substructure and foundation on which it is built; and dialogue is the outer shell, the façade, the transparent encasement covering the activities that will go on inside. If you keep these images in mind, you will be able to see why the real guts of the play (its core) reside in dramatic action and characters, but that they cannot be built into the structure without the foundation of given circumstances and the façade of dialogue.

Given Circumstances (Playwright's Setting): The Foundation

Definition

The term *given circumstances* (the playwright's setting) concerns all material in a playscript that delineates the environment—or the special "world" of the play—in which the action takes place. This material includes (1) environmental facts (the specific conditions, place, and time); (2) previous action (all that has happened before the action begins); and (3) polar attitudes (points of view toward their world held by the principal characters).

Given Circumstances versus Playwright's Setting

Although Russian actor-director Konstantin Stanislavski's phrase *given circumstances* will be used throughout this text after this initial explanation, the parenthetical phrase *playwright's setting* is also mentioned because you may be more familiar with it. However, as a term, it is

so frequently confused with what a designer makes—the actual stage construction—that you should avoid using it altogether. Many readers of plays commonly assume that the explicit directions describing a room or other location that usually appear in the printed editions of modern plays have been set down by their authors. However, these sometimes depict the settings used in the first production and thus represent the work of the designers as recorded by a stage manager or an editor. Even when such a description comes from an author's own manuscript, a further danger exists because the author may try to play the role of stage designer, a role about which he may know little or nothing at all. If you, as a reader-director, are not aware of this pitfall, you may find it difficult to free yourself from these initial suggestions because the printed word may leave a strong imprint on you. There is much less harm in reading these directions after you have studied the play, for then you will have a strong conception of the inherent setting which stems from the given circumstances.

Dialogue is the only reliable source of given circumstances. As you study plays, you will quickly become aware that all authors write their settings directly into their dialogue, either overtly or subconsciously. Given circumstances are a matter of feeling about objects and places, about time and what has happened before the play begins, and about the feelings of the characters for the special world of the play. The totality is what a playwright must communicate to the audience as deftly and as accurately as possible, for what happens in a play will be rooted in these given circumstances.

Analyzing the Given Circumstances

You will note in the following discussion that the first two topics—Environmental Facts and Previous Action—are far more factual than the third—Polar Attitudes. Yet, it is this last area that will actually set up the beginning point of a play, because it is the most important aspect of the given circumstances. Look for the facts, yes; but the attitudes of characters toward those facts are extremely important.

Environmental facts. All plays establish some delineation of the exact place and time of the action as well as give specific information about the environment. These elements are called the *facts of the play*, regardless of whether the playwright has been historically accurate, because they remain fixed throughout the play. The director should isolate these facts by systematically noting them under the following categories:

1. *Geographical location.* The geographical location refers to the exact place. This category should also include climate, because weather often defines specific location and can affect dramatic action.
2. *Date.* The date includes the year, season, and time of day. Ask yourself: What is significant about the date?
3. *Economic environment.* The economic environment is the class level and the state of wealth or poverty. If two or more economic levels are used in a play, be certain to record the facts of each level. (In telling the story of the play and in communicating with actors, it is often important to understand who controls money in the world of the play, because this affects the choices characters make in the struggle of the dramatic action.)
4. *Political environment.* The political environment refers to the specific relationships of the characters to the form of government under which they live. Many plays have definite political settings that will strongly affect the behavior of the characters. Many other plays tacitly accept a form of government that has established basic

restrictions on the characters. Do not take what you may think is direct omission to mean that it is unimportant. Look carefully for clues throughout the script, because the author may be taking this given circumstance for granted on the assumption that this will be understood in context. But *you* cannot make such an assumption. The author will leave a trail of implications behind, and these you must pick up.

5. *Social environment.* The social environment is the mores and social institutions under which the characters live. These facts are extremely important because they may be manifested through their restrictions on the outward behavioral patterns of the characters; consequently, they may set up basic conflicts in the action of the play.
6. *Religious environment.* The religious environment consists of formal and informal psychological controls. Much that applies to item 4 also applies here.

When you study the given circumstances of a play, you must strictly avoid reading anything into the play; all facts must be explicitly stated or implied, as suggested in item 4 above. Do not assume anything. Some plays will involve all of these categories; others will emphasize some of the categories but not others. Above all, *do not try to reconstruct your own idea of historical fact* surrounding a play; *if it is not in the play, it does not exist.* A playwright is not writing a history but telling a story; he may not know his history well at all, or he may be deliberately shifting the facts to suit his own purposes. Do not try to correct him; rather, you should record the facts exactly as the playwright prescribes them.

Previous action. It is necessary to make a sharp distinction between *present action* (what an audience actually sees *happening* immediately in front of it) and *previous action* (what an audience discovers *happened before the present action begins*). All plays begin somewhere in the middle or toward the end of things; thus, given circumstances usually include some dependence on past action so that the present action has a base from which to move forward. More recent plays, those written since the early 1960s (with Pinter's being a prime example) depend very little on explicit revealing of past action, whereas others (those of Ibsen, for instance) include past action in an explicit way. Both kinds of action—previous and present—are included in what is loosely defined as a story. But the director always works specifically with *present action,* although one of the major problems is to discover how to make the necessary revelations about the past as active as possible. In modern plays based on psychological revelation, the past plays an enormous part in the explanation, as it does in a Freudian psychoanalysis; yet, the vital play for audiences lies only in what is actively happening, the struggle immediately before its eyes.

You must learn to separate these two kinds of action. The previous action, though it may take all of the first act and sometimes longer to open up fully, establishes the point where the present action actually begins. Once you learn how to make this distinction, you will know how to ensure that the past is interesting on the stage. A good playwright will make a piece of past action exciting by giving the character a present action in the process of recalling it; that is, he will arrange for the recounting to do something to a character we are watching. Thus, to the director, there is never a dull exposition but only *a recalling of the past under the excitement and tension of active engagement with other characters in the present.* In this way, a piece of the past is *necessary in the struggle of the present*. A director who does not know this point of structure will lose control of the audience quickly. This is the key to handling the plays of Ibsen and Chekhov and much of Realistic drama.

Because you will likely be dealing with plays that span the entire range of what may be broadly termed Realist drama, works from the mid- to late nineteenth century on down to the present, it is important to understand that previous action is one of the structural

components to have undergone change in the way dramatists have deployed it in their playwriting. As Realism developed as a style in the twentieth century, certain dramatists began to use previous action in subtly different ways from how earlier Realist playwrights such as Ibsen, Shaw, and Chekhov had used it. Pirandello, for example, in such seminal plays as *Right You Are, If You Think You Are,* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author,* showed that a group of characters (not unlike people in real life) may have different memories or interpretations of what happened in the past with these differences feeding the present conflict and thus the dramatic action in a profound way. In some ways Pirandello, a key figure in the evolution of dramatic style, seems to use previous action to demonstrate that the past may not always be entirely knowable. Later in the century, dramatists such as Harold Pinter and Sam Shepard developed previous action even further as a structural component of a story. In plays such as Pinter's *The Birthday Party* or Shepard's *Buried Child,* explicit explication of the previous action may be minimal on certain key points, lending a certain mystery to the basic situation the characters find themselves in, much as sometimes happens in life, wherein the past is not always evident, especially to participants in the story who may not have been present. But whether the previous action is as explicitly delineated as in Ibsen or as partially revealed (and mysterious) as in some Pinter plays, mastery of the previous action in terms of finding how it relates to the present dramatic action is one of the director's most important duties. And, like getting into the inner workings of a good detective story, this can be deeply satisfying and even fun for both director and actors.

A technique for separating these two areas of action is the simple one of underlining in the text all lines that *recall* the past. A text by Ibsen contains many such lines, particularly in the first act; and often there are important revelations later in the play, especially when new characters are introduced. If you list these previous actions as they are introduced and then note the present actions, you will see their direct relationship.

A director can obscure a production by careless inattention to previous action, for some playwrights handle the necessary recalling in such subtle ways that an audience will miss important points unless the director carefully sets them out. Plays do not "talk" themselves; they are communicated by actors and directors who know what a play is "talking" about. Congreve's *The Way of the World* is one of the greatest plays in the English language. However, if an audience misses the point—made very briefly in one line, that Mirabell was once a lover to Mrs. Fainall, that he left her pregnant, and that he arranged for her marriage to Fainall—the import of most of the action that follows involving Mirabell as well as Fainall will be misunderstood and its significance lost. This example is extreme, but in kind it is forever recurring. Learn what previous action is and then you will know what to do with it in production.

Polar attitudes. All characters in a play, as in real life, are conditioned by the special world they are caught in, the world of their own prejudices, tolerances and intolerances, and assumptions when they are forced to have relationships with others and must take actions affecting themselves and others. The special world of a character is conditioned, of course, by environmental facts and by previous action. Although it depends on these concrete details, it differs explicitly in that it is the "emotional environment" of a character, the stresses and strains under which that character lives. Modern slang might call them "hang-ups." The special world of the principal character is always in focus *at the beginning of a play* because it establishes his position vis-à-vis the other characters. This is the *inner environment* of a play that sets up the conflicts and the problems: the environment of love relationships in and out of marriage; the environment of family pressures that cause love and hate between mothers and sons, fathers and sons, and mothers and daughters; the environment

of political, religious, and social pressures that force people to behave in ways that may destroy their families and their relationships to these families; the environments of fear of power, disregard of others, indifference to wealth or love of wealth, and indifference to religion or its opposite. *A character is caught in this special world, and the play is about how the character is destroyed by it or escapes from it.*

Here is an important fact about plays: In the course of a play, a principal character *does not change in character, but his attitudes change* under pressures from forces beyond his control. The other characters serve as specific instruments to these changes. As the principal character meets these forces, he must adjust to them, and, as he does so, certain capabilities dormant within (his true character) come to the surface and force him to act. These capabilities, for better or worse, have been present all the time, but they have never been called on and thus recognized as points of character. The development in a play's action, therefore, is composed of the changing attitudes in the principal character toward his *inner* environment, toward *his special world* as it was focused at the beginning of the play.

It is also important to point out that all of the characters in a play do not change their attitudes, but only the principal characters, a fact that makes them principal. Secondary characters thus act as instruments in these changes. In a play-analysis, it is always the primary characters that concern us most, for then we can determine the exact force and functions of the secondary characters.

Most plays show radical shifts in the attitudes of their principal characters from the *positions they held at the beginning* to those they hold at the end. A philosophical way of expressing this shift is to say that a character moves from ignorance to knowledge. He sees the world in which he lives more and more clearly *after* the actions he has been forced to take during the course of the play than he did before. Thus, it is necessary to pin down the attitudes toward the inner environment (special world) held at the beginning of a play by a principal character so that a director can clearly see the final pole of his character and can later help the actor find both poles, as well as help the other characters see their functions in the change. What happens in between these poles is the dramatic action.

By setting out the polar attitudes of each principal character, the director can see the scope of what happens in between the poles—the arc of the characters—and the explicit effects that given circumstances have on the characters. Thus, the shape of the play is explicitly evident in the polarities of the principal characters.

What is meant by the beginning of a play, then, is the defined positions of the attitudes held by the principal characters of the play toward the special world they are caught in and within which they take action. These positions declare explicitly where the *present action* begins. The characters in most plays (Ionesco's antihero is an exception) will have strong feelings of either like or dislike for the present inner environment in which they find themselves. The struggle or present action that follows will either shake them loose from their liking or bring their dislike to liking (or at least to acceptance). If a character does not finally accept what he dislikes at the beginning of a play, he will probably die or exile himself in the process of resisting the forced change that others bring on him and become what is called a *tragic hero.* In comedy, if a character strongly resists being pried loose from what he already likes intensely at the beginning, he will survive, but he will be ridiculed and become what is called a *comic fool.* But whatever happens to him, the attitudes he has at the beginning will certainly be radically changed by the end, or if he is a certain kind of comic fool, he may go on blissfully, never realizing that anyone has tried to change him.

An attitude toward the special world at the beginning of a play is usually more general than specific. It is usually something the character has taken for granted as the natural state of affairs, and he is therefore not consciously aware of it, although it most certainly will

be pointed out to the audience in one way or another. The action of the play will make him aware of his special world because it will subject him to a test of his attitudes through direct conflict with others. The initial action in a play will usually point out to him where he stands in contrast to others, although he may be very blind about why he stands where he does. The attitudes of characters, then, should be general statements and not tied specifically to the present action that will follow. Here are some examples of initial attitudes:

> Men are foolish and romantic and can be manipulated rather easily. (Hedda in *Hedda Gabler.* What is her final attitude?)
>
> The only thing that really matters is money. (Regina in *The Little Foxes.* What is her final attitude?)
>
> "Good" women are dull, embarrassing, and impossible to talk to. (Marlowe in *She Stoops to Conquer.* What is his final attitude?)
>
> A king is sacred and no one can challenge his God-given right to dictate. (Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex.* What is his final attitude?)
>
> Love of women is all romantic adoration and worship. (Marchbanks in *Candida.* What is his final attitude?)

When you have learned to pinpoint the special world of a play, you will understand the secret of its inner workings because you will know what the environmental forces are that hold the principal characters in check at the beginning. This knowledge will show you what they must fight against to overcome those forces in order to arrive at the final pole.

In the actual practice of trying to determine polar attitudes, it is usually easier to find the initial pole for each character by noting what has happened to each character at the end. Remember that the interest of an audience will be focused on what happens between the poles, for this is the dramatic action, the buffeting that brings about the change in the principal characters. This is what holds the audience so riveted to the play and what makes the change so climactic, so theatrical, and so emotionally disturbing.

EXERCISES

1. Using any Realistic play (*Riders to the Sea, Ghosts, Hedda Gabler, American Buffalo,* etc.), list the environmental facts in the specific categories suggested in this chapter. What do these facts suggest about a possible stage setting? Can you "see" the setting? Can you visualize some possible costumes? What do they tell you about body movement? About decorum (behavior specific to the place)? Do they suggest what the characters think about and what they feel? What does physical circumstance (environmental fact) have to do with human behavior?
2. Delineate the previous action in the same play you have studied in Exercise 1 by underlining all the parts of the speeches in the first act that literally refer to actions that have happened *before* the here-and-now of the act begins. If you are looking at *Hedda Gabler* or another play by Ibsen, how many lines by actual count contain references to previous actions? (Be very careful not to include those recountings of actions that the audience has already witnessed as present actions; those narrations are present actions because the playwright intends the audience to weigh and evaluate a character in terms of that character's judgments of what has happened.) In your own judgment, what is the effect of this accumulation of knowledge about the

past? Does it have any effect on what is happening in the present? Does it tell us anything about the characters? Can you see why it is unimportant in itself, but only as it affects a character's present action?

3. *Very important:* As an alternate exercise, study several opening pages of a play by listing the previous action on one side of a sheet and the present action on the other. In this way, you have a ready comparison of what the playwright is actually doing.
4. In working with the same play used in Exercises 1 through 3, delineate the attitude of each major character toward each of the following aspects of their inner emotional world:
   a. How do I (the character) feel about my world?
   b. How do I feel about my relationships?
   c. How do I feel about myself?
   d. How do I feel about my prospects?

   It is most helpful if you write out the answers to each of these in a first-person stream of consciousness—*how each character might say it if they actually could articulate their feelings and perceptions on these points.* Don't get lost in great length; two to three good sentences on each should capture the character's inner headspace. If you can do this with insight, you will know *where each character "is"* at the beginning of the dramatic action, you will know that character's beginning pole. This will be of incalculable value to you in working with the actors in these principal roles.

Dialogue: The Façade of the Playscript

Now that you understand the roots of a play—where, when, and how it derives from the immediate past (the given circumstances)—you are ready to examine its façade, its outer covering, the dialogue. What is inside will be given special attention in Chapter 4 when you study dramatic action and characters. But for now, you need to become aware that dialogue is not just the things people say but also, as importantly, *what they do.*

Definition

Although dialogue is obviously the words that pass between two or more characters in a play, it is not so obvious that its primary function is *to "contain" the dramatic action,* to be its primary vehicle. In addition, although dialogue may appear as a written line on a printed page, its primary intention is to be *heard* rather than read. It is talk and not writing.

Dialogue Is Action

Dialogue is not merely a verbal interchange between characters; rather, it is highly economical and symbolic intercommunication of *actions* between characters in which each forces his wants and needs on the other. *Dialogue always exists in the present tense* because it comes out of the mouths of speakers who think, as in life, in the present and who say things to one another to get what they want.

Dialogue Is a Building Process

A says something to *B,* and *B* responds; this causes *A* to reply to *B* and *B* to *A* in a continuing cycle. But no matter how refined a line of dialogue may be, no matter how elaborate the choice of words, the purpose is always the same: to seek response from another person, just as we do in real life.

Thus, the nature of dialogue is its built-in characteristic of *forcing* or *getting* something from the other person. The words used on the outside may try to conceal this forcing in an elaborate way, or they may be direct and not conceal it at all. From a casual reader's view, dialogue looks like it is only the printed text of the play, but its basic function is to contain the heart and soul, the essence of the play—the *subtext*, or dramatic action.

Dialogue Is in Verse or Prose

Plays vary greatly in the choice of language used by characters. This choice is dictated by the given circumstances, because they specifically delineate the decorum or outward show—that is, how the characters behave (their manners or "lack of manners"). Most modern plays have prose dialogue because of its likeness to the reality of everyday life, but a few are written in verse forms, as were many plays of the past. Verse forms are obviously more artificial in their use of language than is prose, but the basic intent is always the same: the containment of the dramatic action. More will be said about verse later in Chapter 29 in the discussion of plays of past ages, but it is sufficient to point out here that verse form is not merely a decorative exterior but a heightened, more compact, exalting language for conveying intense feelings and high actions. The effect of verse is often as potent as physical body movements, simply because verse conveys intensive inner feelings at the highest pitch. It thus has the capability of direct contact with an audience. This is why many playwrights who write dialogue in prose often try to find a language somewhat more elevated than what is used in everyday life, as Arthur Miller did in *The Crucible.*

Dialogue Is Inner Language

Dialogue should be analyzed in detail to discover its particular characteristics in addition to its function as a cover for dramatic action and its direct reflection of given circumstances. Even within the narrow range of the given circumstances for a particular play, an author has a large scope in his choice of words and their arrangement and in the images devised. Dialogue is thus said to be *connotative* rather than denotative—much more weighted with feeling and meaning than dictionary usage or definitive meaning. In the human context of plays, characters feel or sense one another (as people who live closely together do in everyday life) and consequently do not talk *at* one another but *with* one another. Thus, the language of drama is highly subjective, inner language. Realism has used a wide variety of folk-speech patterns—dialects—in the interest of showing how people talk in terms of who they are in life rather than in an elevated way. Film has fully exploited this aspect of dialogue, particularly in reproducing lower socioeconomic environments.

Dialogue Is Heard Language

Any study of a play written in dialect requires penetration beyond the choice of words and the modification of vowels, for an author who has really heard the speech used for a certain character will reproduce all sorts of cultural overtones buried in the outer form, a subtle delineation of given circumstances. Thus, the speech sounds of Brooklyn or London's East End reflect the hardness of city life, just as southern U.S. speech is often rendered in the slower rhythm of the rural South. Most recent plays that intend reproduction of local idiom (August Wilson's plays, for instance) do not set down the modifications of sound in spelling as playwrights once did, but rely on the specific choice of words or lack of them to convey the inarticulate aspects of the characters. The dialect is thus left to the actor to supply.

Directors must therefore learn to hear dialogue in the mind's ear—not only the literal reproductions of sound as they hear it in everyday life but also the reproduction of word-feeling as playwrights set them out in characters. You must learn the craft of matching speech decorum, as perceived in a play's text from the given circumstances, to character decorum. More will be said about this technique later in connection with acting and actors. (See Exercise 2 that follows in this chapter.)

Dialogue Is Structured of Lines and Speeches

As has already been pointed out, dialogue is carefully crafted. A close examination of any good play will show that the author has usually arranged the sentence structure to throw the important phrase—the actual point of each line—to the end of the line. This placement makes it climactic. Speeches made up of several sentences are carefully constructed in the same way. When a director is aware of this technique, it is more likely that she can be helpful in extracting good line readings from the actors, and will be more able to accomplish the desirable emphases the play requires throughout.

No director can go very far with actors, however, without a full awareness of word forms and punctuation, and their distinctive uses in the interlocking arrangements that comprise sentence structure, and beyond that "speeches," when they occur in a play. Many directors and actors trained in Stanislavskian approaches assume that if the subtext of a line is fully comprehended, the technical delivery of that line is assured. This assumption is simply not true, for the subtext and the text must both be communicated. This double value will be discussed in detail in Chapter 15 on the oral delivery of the text, but the important thing to understand here is that the *basis* for all dramatic meaning is the subtext—the inner quality of the line. This will be discussed in detail under Characteristics of Dramatic Action in the next chapter.

EXERCISES

1. Read aloud some dialogue from *Riders to the Sea* or another study play, and attempt to reproduce the lines according to the word order and other speech modifications. What does it sound like? Can you get in the swing of it? Now play a recording of an actor speaking in a dialect. Why does it sound more genuine than your attempts? Can you pick out any national characteristics in the sound alone? Can you hear social and economic circumstances? Can you hear the specific character traits in the sound?
2. Apply the same test to a television sitcom. Can you visualize a "plain" script without the detailed inflections and accompanying body language used by the actors? Why are the inflections so important to the dramatic action?
3. Examine some prose dialogue from a play by Eugene O'Neill. Point out the specific characteristics in the choice of words, the length of sentences and speeches, and the climactic build in each speech. Is the important word or phrase at the end? Does O'Neill seem to repeat any particular group of "sense" words? What does his dialogue sound like when spoken? Try it.
4. Watch and listen to two actors read aloud from a play by Harold Pinter, such as *The Birthday Party* or *The Homecoming*. Examine in detail Pinter's development of a particular line, and then examine a group of lines. Do you hear given circumstances in the lines? What do you sense about the characters, about how inarticulate they seem? What sort of dialects does Pinter intend?

5. **Read aloud a passage from *La Bête* by David Hirson, a contemporary play in verse. or from Richard Wilbur's verse translations of *Tartuffe* or *The Misanthrope* by Molière. Can you hear the regular beat, in the verse form? What does the verse form do that prose would not do? Repeat the same experiment with T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral.* Can you hear his different verse forms? Can you identify their beats (number of stresses in each line)? What does Eliot's word choice and verse form add that prose could not accomplish? For contrast, read aloud a passage from Eliot's *The Cocktail Party,* which he wrote in a verse form, although he declared that it ought to sound like prose.**

Note: An exercise in the dramatic-action characteristics of dialogue will follow after the explanation of dramatic action in the next chapter.

4

The Core of the Playscript

Dramatic Action and Characters

Dramatic action is the clash of forces in a play—the continuous conflict between and among characters. Here lies the emotional content that moves audiences, for understanding the action will unlock the play. The core of all plays is thus action and characters—human beings who *engage in action* and receive action from others and are thus *forced to take action yet again in what becomes a chain reaction of forcing and a contest or struggle for a desired outcome.*

Dramatic action and characters are inextricably tied together, a fact of dramatic form that you will understand better as you work through this chapter. The word *plot* is used here in the way playwrights or literary critics use it to describe the *sequential arrangement of the conflict incidents* that compose the action. However, for the purpose of detailed discussion in this chapter, dramatic action and character, even though they are linked, are treated separately so that you can see their individual characteristics more clearly.

Understanding the nature and mechanics of dramatic action is a primary study of the director, because action is the life force of a play, the living stuff of conflict out of which all other forces grow. Unless the director comprehends its workings she cannot possibly help the actors or effectively shape the physical production. She will always be guessing. Again, what happens in a play is the action; it is what holds an audience, thrills them, or makes them laugh. As has already been pointed out, plays are not realities but constructs—contrivances, if you will—that may be likened, through analogy, to the human body. Just as the heart and other vital organs make possible living and breathing in the human being, so dramatic action provides the life-giving force to the play.

Characteristics of Dramatic Action

Present Tense

Earlier, you learned that dramatic action exists only in the present tense. Thus, the participants in the action—the characters—are always in a state of "doing" not "did." To make this point clear, members of your class should read aloud a page from a novel. You will see that it is written in past tense in terms of the doings of the characters. Put another way, its narrative exists in past tense. This is one of the defining differences between fiction and

drama—fiction is past tense narrative, but drama exists in the present, its characters are depicted doing what they do in the eternal "now" that directors and actors learn to enter into when dealing with characters' thinking and actions. For contrast, read aloud a page of a play, and you will see the characters taking action in the present or the "now" as we sometimes refer to it in the theater. This is what gives the living quality to a play and gives it the immediacy to reach us instantaneously and move us deeply. Whenever two people meet in a play, as in real life, they start "doing" to each other, and this is what we watch through a sequence of stage time. A play appears to capture life, and we watch and hear it being lived in front of us. There is never any past tense during a play's life; everything that happens, even the ways the previous action is conveyed, occurs in the present.

Dramatic Action Is Not Activity

It's important to understand the difference between action and activity—both in the text and in performance. You should be able to do this because from our examination of dialogue you learned that the words a character speaks contain the dramatic action, they convey it, but they are not the same thing as the dramatic action itself. Someone could say, "Oh, I like your shirt," but it's possible that this person in fact doesn't really like your shirt and is saying those words as a tease or as a sarcastic dig—or, alternatively, the person really *does* like your shirt and wants to give you a compliment. Or maybe it's not the shirt the person is interested in, but *you*, and offering a compliment about the shirt is just a way to get a conversation started. There you see that four *different, plausible* dramatic actions (to tease, to dig, to compliment, to engage) could all be conveyed by the same words. And which of these it actually is becomes clear from the context and *how* those words are said. If this were in a play, it's very likely you would know if the actor were playing the line in such a way as to make the intent, the underlying dramatic action, clear. If you understand this example, then you will grasp the distinction between action and activity because the difference is much the same.

Activity is what a character (eventually in the person of the actor) is *physically* doing in a scene or at a given moment on the stage, but underneath that physical doing is the underlying dramatic action of the moment or the unit of action. (This is analogous to what a character may be *saying* in a given situation, as in the example above, relative to what their *actual* dramatic action.) Sometimes the activity, what the character is physically doing, is specified by the playwright, but very often it is arrived at in rehearsal by the actor and the director as part of evolving the physical life of the play.

The activities in a scene, then, fulfill two functions. First, they contain and convey the dramatic action—*in the context of the given circumstances of the scene*—in a relationship to the action that is very similar to what the dialogue is doing in relation to the dramatic action. Second, the activity provides a "fabric of normalcy" for the character (eventually in the person of the actor) in the scene or the unit. Very seldom do characters indicate that they are there to have a show-down with others. More often it is like it is in life, we are going about our day, trying to have a normal day, and something happens to disturb or break through that normalcy we are trying to maintain. The point is, the *character* is not there to play the scene in the *play* (in a Realistic play, the character doesn't even know he is in a play)—the character is there to get on with his life that morning (or whenever). But underneath this, the action—the exchange of forcings between this character and the other one in the scene—is taking place. And what is interesting on the stage is seeing the tension *between these two things*, the upper level of activity, in which the character is most likely just getting on with life and appearing "normal," and the lower level of dramatic action or forcing, in which he is engaging in a struggle with the other character—something he most likely doesn't want to be obvious, so he tries