

THEATRICAL ROLES: AN INTRODUCTION TO THEATRE



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Theatrical Roles

An Introduction to Theatre

By Gibson Alessandro Cima

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Preface

About this OER

In the fall of 2020, my home institution, Northern Illinois University (NIU), marshalled its resources to confront the twin crises of a global pandemic and an ongoing racial reckoning. Classes moved online, the university implemented mandatory surveillance testing, and instructors received optional online teaching training. Responding to nationwide calls for racial justice, NIU embarked on a variety of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. The Office for Academic Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ADEI) and the Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning (CITL) co-sponsored a workshop series called the Faculty Academy on Cultural Competence and Equity (FACCE). CITL also offered faculty members the opportunity to earn a micro-credential in Inclusive Teaching for Equitable Learning from the Association for College and University Educators (ACUE). Another effort aimed to reduce the drop, failure, and withdrawal (DFW) rate for introductory gen-ed courses. In the fall of 2022, I received a course release to redesign Introduction to Theatre for non-majors. The class had been taught with a similar syllabus for two decades. From 2017–2022, it boasted one of the worst DFW rates at NIU. The class failed students of color in alarming numbers. At the height of the pandemic, fall 2020, the DFW rate was 43%. By the spring of 2022, it had risen to an astonishing 52%. While I recognize that DFW rates are not a metric of student success or learning, at these extremes, they are a sign that something is deeply wrong, pedagogically. I sought to change those outcomes by decolonizing Intro to Theatre.

What does it mean to decolonize our curriculum? For Joseph Flynn, NIU's Executive Director for Equity and Inclusion, speaking at FAACE, “Decolonizing is about understanding and dismantling mythologies” (Flynn 2023). When I learned theatre history as an undergrad, the central myth went something like this: “the Greeks invented theatre; the Romans stole it; the Christians banned it, then unbanned it, then Shakespeare, Chekhov, Ibsen, and Miller.” If for Roland Barthes “myth is a language” (Barthes 1957, 11), then, theatre history’s language is the language of white supremacy. In this mythology, theatre is the torch of civilization carried forth through the centuries by white male geniuses, with the occasional assistance of Hrosvitha and/or Aphra Behn. (Despite what some appear to believe, Calderon and Lope de Vega are not people of color, just white men from Spain.) The singular white male genius myth divided all theatre and performance into two categories: “Western” (read *white*) or “non-Western” and unworthy of serious study. This is what sociologist Steve Garner means when he defines whiteness as “the Greenwich Mean Time [or standard] of identity” (2007, 47). White theatre *was* theatre. Non-white theatre *was not* theatre.

Sometime when I was in grad school, this racist and reductive narrative expanded slightly to include Nōh, Kabuki, Kathakali, Jingju, Hikayat, Hopi Kachina dances, and other global practices. Yet, the central framework remained rigidly Western. Even today, major textbooks seem preoccupied with striking the appropriate balance between Western and non-Western material. I continue to believe this balancing of the scales is wrongheaded. The “West and the rest” approach repackages the same white mythologies as its predecessor. Rather than othering by omission, the “West and the rest” syllabus treats theatre and performance from historically and currently marginalized communities as mere daytrips from the main cruise of “real” theatre. Imagine a white-clad cruise director megaphoning, “Everybody off the boat! We’re traipsing around Black theatre today!”

When I developed my first Intro to Theatre syllabus, I determined not to repeat this teaching malpractice. I was guided by two maxims:

- 1.) I do not have to teach the way that I was taught.
- 2.) In the words of historian Eric Foner, “this history we were taught could not have produced the present we were living in” (quoted in Homan 2021).

Reflecting on over a decade of syllabi, however, I see the various ways I reinscribed mythologies of whiteness in my curriculum. Megan Lewis compares whiteness to the *laager*, the literal circle of wagons that protected nineteenth-century descendants of Dutch colonists on their great trek across Southern Africa. “Like whiteness,” she writes, “the laager must maintain a belief in its infallibility to remain intact and powerful and, like whiteness, it becomes vulnerable to anxiety when its porousness is revealed” (Lewis 2016, 28). I recall this white anxiety, especially during my many years as a contingent faculty member at various private universities. How far outside of Western theatre mythologies can I stray without upsetting my employer and being replaced by someone who will obediently teach the canon?

From the relative safety of the tenure track, with the imprimatur of course-release funding from NIU’s College of Visual and Performing Arts, I injected several decolonizing interventions into the syllabus. I held a Viking funeral for the progressive narrative

of theatre history—just put it on a boat, pushed it into the current, and set it ablaze. I taught theatre and performance as part of a mimetic impulse innate to all human beings and not the sole possession of white men. I focused on a diverse group of case studies in the production roles: the performer, playwright, director, and designer. My mantra was, “If the students are moving, I’m winning. If they’re sitting, I’m losing.” Assignments offered students practical experiences in each of these different roles. A final project placed students in small teams with the task of producing a short play. I eliminated punitive attendance and late work policies and instead incentivized participation and revision. I implemented equitable grading practices geared toward assessing students’ mastery of the material, rather than their ability to behave the way I think a student *ought* to behave. With these changes and the help of excellent instructors, I’m proud to say that in the spring of 2023 we were able to reduce the DFW rate from 52% to 17%. (Hold for applause.)

While that is a significant result, there is still plenty of room for improvement. Decolonization is an ongoing process, not a destination. In 2024, I received a grant from the Illinois State Library Association to create an Open Educational Resource (OER) for my Intro to Theatre Course. The result is the textbook you are currently reading. The central challenge in developing an OER for a theatre course is finding freely accessible material that also reflects diverse perspectives. Here, I have relied on a network of friends and colleagues currently working in the theatre who have generously agreed to make some of their work and their artistic processes available for public study. I will continue to reimagine the course in the future, but I am encouraged by this direction. At the 2022 meeting of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), playwright Dominique Morrisseau charged ATHE members and leaders to “build from the rubble” (ATHE 2022). But in the case of undergraduate intro to theatre gen-ed and theatre history curricula, there is simply not enough rubble. We have not fully understood the white mythologies of theatre and theatre history so we can begin to dismantle them. This textbook represents one effort toward that larger project.

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How to Use this Book

The book was created as a companion to Northern Illinois University’s Introduction to Theatre general education course. As the title suggests, the textbook focuses on *Theatrical Roles*. Each chapter/unit introduces the global history of a particular production role: playwright, director, performer, and designer/technician. This history is followed by a case study that delves into a contemporary theatre artist’s approach to a particular project. A filmed interview with the practitioner accompanies the chapter. Each chapter ends with a practical production assignment. I hope that this resource can be helpful to my colleagues and their students by providing a high-quality and freely available introduction to theatre.

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1: INTRODUCTION- WHAT IS THEATRE?

As far as we know, theatre has always been with us.

The earliest evidence of theatre may lie in the 40,000-year-old cave paintings discovered on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. These paintings, ~~some of the oldest figurative artworks on Earth, depict human-animal hybrids engaged in what may be ritual~~ action. These images may suggest early performance traditions—perhaps dance, chant, or masked enactments designed to commune with forces beyond our understanding (Aubert, et. al. 2019, 442). Theatre as a *live, embodied, collaborative form of storytelling* is one of humanity's oldest tools for understanding the world.

1. Live: Theatre happens in front of an audience in real time. Unlike the far more recent mediums of film, television, and internet videos, theatre is not pre-recorded or edited. If a performance lasts ninety minutes, then ninety minutes will have passed in the lives of both the performers and the audience in a shared space.
2. Embodied: The primary medium of theatre is the actor's body. While paintings might employ stretched canvas and pigment applied with a paintbrush to create a unified image, in theatre, the actor's body is paint and paintbrush.
3. Collaborative: Theatre occurs in the moment where actors meet onstage and tell a story together. Creating this moment requires many other collaborators: a playwright, who writes the story; a director, who composes the stage action; and designers, who create the environment in which the story unfolds. The most important collaborator is the audience viewing the performance. The play takes place in their collective and individual imaginations. There is no king. There is only an actor wearing a gold-painted crown, sitting in a rickety wooden chair, and yet the audience sees a king. That is part of what people refer to as the willing suspension of disbelief, or the “magic” of theatre. Playwrights, directors, actors, designers, and audiences work together to tell the story.

Theatre emerges from a *mimetic impulse*, a basic human tendency to imitate, role-play, and perform. *Mimesis*, from the ancient Greek word for “imitation,” refers to our instinct to embody others, retell stories, and act out what we observe.^[i] In early childhood, we pretend to be parents, animals, heroes, or imaginary creatures. This impulse doesn't fade. It becomes more structured, stylized, and intentional. Theatre arises when these instinctive performances are connected to a story, rehearsed, and shared with an audience. Though the practice relates to the role-playing that occurs in childhood, theatre is more than child's play. It speaks about what we already know and what we dare to hope. Theatre is a form of *symbolic communication*, shaped by culture, tradition, aesthetics, and purpose. It is a technology for memory, imagination, and meaning making.

[i] The term *mimesis* comes from ancient Greek philosophy and refers to imitation or representation. The concept was central to Aristotle's theory of drama, which argued that theatre imitates human action in ways that allow audiences to reflect on moral and emotional questions.

Theatre is a global phenomenon. The word *theatre* comes from the ancient Greek *theatron*, meaning “seeing place,” which refers to both the physical space of performance and the communal act of witnessing. While Western traditions often dominate theatre studies, theatre is not the sole possession of Europeans. People across different cultures and at different times have used performance to transmit knowledge, preserve cultural values, confront social injustices, grieve, celebrate, teach, heal, and dream. Every human society, from every historical period, appears to have developed its own performance practices with its own rituals, aesthetics, and social functions. Consider the masked dances of the Dogon in Mali, the shadow puppet theatre of Java, Indian Kūṭiyāṭṭam (Sanskrit dramas) and Kathakali (dance theatre), Japanese Nōh and Kabuki, Chinese xiqu, Aztec temple rituals, and Indigenous storytelling ceremonies across the Americas and Australia. Cultures that, to our knowledge, had no contact with each other nevertheless developed practices that share many of theatre's elements: storytelling, direction, role-playing, costume, lighting, music, setting, and audience. Theatre serves not only as entertainment or art, but as a cultural technology: a shared space where we represent the world, challenge it, and reimagine what it might become.

1.1: Ritual Origins of Theatre?

1.2: Theatre as a Global and Cultural Practice

1.3: Theatre as Social Mirror and Political Tool

1.4: Theatre in the Contemporary World

1.5: Theatrical Roles

1.6: Learning Check and Chapter References

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1.1: Ritual Origins of Theatre?

Many cultures imagine a mythic origin for theatre in ritual.^[i] The earliest surviving evidence of what might be called a play—an ancient Egyptian ceremonial procession scholars have called *The Triumph of Horus*—describes the ritual battle between Horus and his uncle Seth. Greek philosopher Aristotle locates the beginnings of tragedy in hymns sung in honor of Dionysus. The word *tragedy* derives from the Greek word *tragōidia*, or “goat song,” possibly referencing ritual sacrifice or choruses dressed as goats or satyrs. Bharata Muni, the supposed author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the foundational text of Indian Sanskrit drama, states that theatre is a gift from Brahma and credits ancient Vedic rituals for its development.^[ii] Japanese playwright Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443) likewise claims a divine origin for theatre, linking the development of Nōh drama to ritual performances offered to Prince Shōtoku (574–622).^[iii] These accounts, across cultures and time periods, suggest a deep and lasting connection between theatre and ritual.

^[i] Scholars have long debated whether theatre developed directly from ritual practices. While many cultures link performance traditions to religious ceremonies, historians caution that there is limited concrete evidence proving that ritual evolved into theatre in a linear historical progression.

^[ii] The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, attributed to Bharata Muni, is a foundational Sanskrit treatise on performance dating roughly between 200 BCE and 200 CE. It describes acting techniques, stage architecture, music, gesture, and aesthetic theory, including the concepts of *bhava* (emotion) and *rasa* (aesthetic flavor experienced by the audience).

^[iii] Japanese playwright and theorist Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443) helped codify the aesthetics of Nōh theatre. His writings emphasize subtlety, spiritual presence, and the concept of *yūgen*, a refined sense of mysterious beauty achieved through restrained performance.

Theatre and ritual certainly share key features. Both involve embodied performance designed to yield a spiritual, social, or emotional result. Both rely on spectatorship. Both often take place in spaces specifically designated or prepared for performance. These overlapping concerns have led many scholars to propose that theatre developed *out of* ritual. But this idea quickly runs into problems. First, there’s little direct evidence to support it. Second, and more importantly, the idea that theatre naturally evolved from ritual rests on the assumption that all cultures follow a single developmental path—from the “simple” or “primitive” to the “complex” or “civilized.” This is a dangerous assumption. Culture doesn’t follow a universal script. Societies emerge in unpredictable, nonlinear, and context-specific ways. Beneath the surface of linear progress narratives lie a Pandora’s box of discredited and deeply harmful ideologies—white supremacy, social Darwinism, and eugenics, or the belief that human reproduction could or should be manipulated to favor so-called desirable traits. These ideas once lent scientific cover to racist hierarchies and colonial domination. Because theatre often reflects society back to itself, these racist ideas are inextricably woven into the fabric of theatre history, literature, and criticism. They continue to haunt thinking that treats non-European cultural forms as evolutionary steppingstones to European “high” art.

For a long time, only European art was considered worthy of serious study. When the rituals or performances of non-European cultures were examined, it was often only to serve colonial narratives: either to position Europe as the culmination of cultural development or to mine “primitive” traditions for artistic inspiration. These ideas were reinforced by *social Darwinism*—a 19th-century theory that applied Charles Darwin’s ideas of natural selection to human societies. Social Darwinist thinking fueled racist and colonial ideologies, including the belief that some cultures were inherently more “advanced” than others. Arguments that theatre evolved from ritual often draw, consciously or not, from these same assumptions. They reduce complex cultural practices to stages in a Eurocentric timeline, where the goal is always something that looks like Western theatre. Today, scholars are more skeptical. While theatre and ritual undoubtedly overlap, the idea that one naturally grew out of the other is far from settled—and often reveals more about who’s doing the theorizing than about the cultures being studied.

1.2: Theatre as a Global and Cultural Practice

What is clear is that theatre is not the invention or property of any one culture. While the word *theatre* is ancient Greek in origin, the practices it names—live, embodied, collaborative storytelling—exist across time, geography, and tradition. As stated already, theatre studies have too often centered Western traditions—particularly Greek tragedy, Shakespearean drama, and 19th- and 20th-century European realism—as if these were universal benchmarks. But this view overlooks the complexity and richness of global performance practices. Performance traditions such as Wayang kulit (Javanese shadow puppetry), Japan's Bunraku puppetry, the Iranian ritual drama of Ta'ziye, the griot storytelling traditions of West Africa are all examples of theatre—or theatre-adjacent forms—that challenge Eurocentric attempts to categorize them.^[i] These traditions do not simply resemble Western theatre; they are complete and coherent systems of performance with their own theories, aesthetics, and cultural functions.

[i] A *griot* is a West African storyteller, historian, and musician responsible for preserving genealogies, histories, and cultural memory through oral performance. Griots demonstrate how storytelling traditions can function simultaneously as education, history, and performance.

Taking a more capacious view of theatre means dismantling binary patterns of thinking—Western vs. non-Western, written vs. oral traditions, colonial vs. postcolonial. These oppositions may have been useful to scholars in the past, but they often obscure more than they reveal. As African literature scholar Dennis Walder acknowledges, “nothing is more likely to enrage certain writers than to hear themselves described as ‘post-colonial’” (Walder 1998, 1). The term itself, though intended to mark resistance and recovery, can end up reinforcing the very systems it seeks to critique. Having been colonized, are these artists now and forevermore postcolonial? Must we always define their work in relation to empire, even when it speaks to entirely different concerns? Rather than flattening cultures into fixed oppositions, we can recognize global performance traditions as already hybrid, fluid, and cosmopolitan. No tradition is pure. Histories of migration, trade, and resistance have shaped theatre globally—Yoruba opera mixes indigenous forms with European instrumentation; experimental Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal's *Teatro do Oprimido* repurposes ancient Greek tragic structure for grassroots activism, and so on.

Understanding theatre as a global and cultural practice also means asking critical questions: Who defines what counts as theatre? Whose stories are preserved and passed down? Whose practices are studied, funded, or celebrated—and whose are ignored or erased? Theatre history is a game of a few pieces; fragmentary evidence of performance often survives because it was valued somehow by the dominant culture at the time. But sometimes pieces survive by accident as in the case of uncomprehending colonial accounts of indigenous ritual performances. New discoveries are still being made in unexpected locations. For example, in 1963, researchers discovered 400 lines from a play by the Greek comedian Menander on papyrus that had been used to wrap a mummy. As students and scholars of theatre, we must observe not only the currents of creative collaboration that flow through and define a theatrical performance but also those of power: the cultural, historical, and institutional forces that have shaped what we study and how we study it. To study theatre globally is to enter a conversation across cultures, to recognize both difference and connection, and to expand our understanding of what theatre can be—and what it can do.

1.3: Theatre as Social Mirror and Political Tool

Case Study: *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* and Anti-Apartheid Theatre in South Africa

Theatre has an uncanny ability to tell the truth under difficult circumstances and get away with it. For example, in South Africa under the legally sanctioned system of racial segregation known as apartheid, it was illegal for people of different races to gather and make theatre. In the early 1970s, Black South African actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona reached across the color barrier to collaborate with Athol Fugard, a white South African playwright and director. They met in secret and rehearsed what would eventually become the landmark protest play *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*.^[i] To provide cover for their collaboration, Fugard hired Kani and Ntshona as his gardeners.

[i] The play *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* was developed collaboratively by South African artists Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona. Produced during the apartheid era, it used minimalist staging and actor storytelling to critique the pass-law system that restricted the movement and identity of Black South Africans.

The play emerged from their rehearsal room discussions about having seen a picture in a photographer's window—or perhaps in a friend's photo album—of a well-dressed, handsome Black man with a big smile on his face, smoking a cigarette in one hand and a pipe in the other. The pipe was a prop meant to signify the man's wealth and status, but he apparently forgot his own cigarette and appeared to be smoking with both hands. The image asked of the collaborators: Why is he smiling? What does a Black man living in South Africa under apartheid have to be happy about? They answered the question: He must have his passbook in order. The passbook was a document that all non-white South Africans were forced to carry. It had their picture in it and controlled all aspects of their lives, including where they could live and where they could seek work. Native South Africans could be asked to show their passbook at any time and if they could not produce it, they would be immediately arrested.

Through their rehearsal room explorations, Kani, Ntshona, and Fugard devised a situation in which Ntshona played Sizwe, a country bumpkin who comes to the big city of Port Elizabeth to look for work without the correct work-seeker's permit in his passbook. Sizwe is caught by a passbook raid and endorsed out of Port Elizabeth, which means he must go back to his hometown of King Williamstown where there is no work. Looking to drown his troubles, Sizwe and his friend Buntu (Kani) spend a night drinking at a shebeen, an illegal bar. The two men relieve themselves in an alley and discover the body of a murder victim, Robert Zwelinzima. They check his passbook and discover he has the correct work-seeker's permit. Buntu changes the pictures in Sizwe and Robert's passbooks so that Sizwe Banzi dies and is reborn as another man's ghost. The play ends with Sizwe-as-Robert, handsomely dressed in a suit bought with the money from his new job, visiting a photographer (also played by Kani) and taking the photo that initially sparked the drama.

Sizwe Banzi Is Dead opened at The Space Theatre in Cape Town on October 8, 1972, and subsequently toured South Africa. To avoid censorship, *Sizwe*'s producers formed private theatre clubs. After purchasing their memberships, spectators were told when and where to appear to view the play. Still, there was an element of danger. At any moment, the venue could be raided by the Special Branch, the South African Secret Police, and audience members could not be sure that state agents weren't among them. *Sizwe* transferred to the Royal Court Theatre in London, England. There, Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona devised *The Island*, a companion piece about the imprisonment of political prisoners on Robben Island off the coast of Cape Town. *Sizwe Banzi* and *The Island* then transferred to Broadway where in 1975 Kani and Ntshona received unprecedented joint Tony Awards for Best Actor. On their return to South Africa, they were detained while performing *Sizwe* and spent twenty-three days in solitary confinement until they were released after an international outcry.

Anti-apartheid plays such as *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* contributed to the eventual end of apartheid by carving out a multi-racial space where a post-apartheid future could be collectively imagined. In the years since South Africa's first free democratic elections on April 27, 1994, the play has entered the South African consciousness. Many young South Africans discover the horrors of apartheid's passbook system by studying and discussing *Sizwe* in school. The play is regularly revived and performed in South Africa and abroad. In 2006, Kani and Ntshona reprised their roles in a production of *Sizwe* that toured internationally. Another notable revival in 2015 featured Kani's son Atandwa in the role his father originated alongside the late great Mncedisi Shabangu as Sizwe. Globally, the play has been translated into many languages and performed in many countries. Its framework and subject matter have proven particularly adaptable to situations of state oppression. For example, famed British director Peter

Brook directed a French-language version in 2006 that addressed France's migrant crisis.

Sizwe Banzi Is Dead shows how theatre can be a mirror and a weapon—reflecting and raising global awareness of the oppressive realities of apartheid while creatively resisting them. By dramatizing the dehumanizing logic of the passbook system, the play speaks not only to its historical moment but also to the enduring power of identity, resistance, and survival under regimes of control. That it emerged from collaborative improvisation, in secret, between Black and white artists—under threat of arrest—reminds us that theatre is not merely entertainment. It is a social practice. Sometimes making theatre can be an act of courage and a means of political intervention. To create, to perform, or even to gather around this story was to risk something.

Discussion Questions 1.3.1

1. What does *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* reveal about the relationship between identity and state documentation? How does the play complicate the idea of who a person is?
2. How did the specific political and social conditions of apartheid shape the way the play was created, performed, and received?
3. In what ways does the act of assuming another identity become both a form of survival and a loss in the play?
4. How does this case study help us think about theatre as more than entertainment? Can you think of a contemporary parallel where performance intersects with protest?
5. How might the play's impact change when performed in South Africa, in London, or on Broadway? Does the meaning of the play change when it is performed today? How does context shape interpretation?

1.4: Theatre in the Contemporary World

In an age of social media, blockbuster visual effects extravaganzas, and twenty-four-hour on-demand entertainment, theatre remains relevant. Why? It may be because theatre somehow feels real. That is a strange thing to say considering the artform is self-consciously inauthentic and not real. But there are no hidden cuts in theatre, no barrage of AI-generated slop. The pacing is slower, too. Compared to an eight-second video one might see while scrolling social media, even the most madcap satire is positively glacial. Theatre asks us to pause and consider. It still holds the power to astonish and delight. The old tricks still work because human beings are mimetic creatures. Imitation predates spoken language and writing as perhaps the earliest form of communication. We clawed our way to the top of the food chain not with claws but with symbolic interaction, with performance. Theatre is a vestige of this vital communication technology. It is a memory machine. As such, it is a crucial tool in the battle of memory against forgetting. The artform is simultaneously ancient and new. Intimately connected with role-playing, storytelling, politics, religion, and ritual, theatre continues to reinvent itself.

One way this process of reinvention happens is through contemporary theatre artists breathing new life into ancient texts. For example, Sophocles' *Antigone*, written in 442 BCE, continues to resonate in times of political oppression. The play centers on Antigone, who defies her uncle Creon's order to leave her brother Polyneices unburied, insisting on honoring divine law over state law. Their clash—between individual conscience and authoritarian rule—has made *Antigone* a powerful protest text across centuries. Jean Anouilh's adaptation was staged in Nazi-occupied Paris in 1944. In apartheid South Africa, Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona's *The Island* (1973) dramatized two political prisoners rehearsing *Antigone* while incarcerated on Robben Island, a notorious prison. Argentinian playwright Griselda Gambaro's *Antigona Furiosa* (1986) reimagined the story to confront the atrocities of Argentina's Dirty War. The Peruvian theatre company Yuyachkani's 2000 one-woman adaptation of *Antigone* addressed the country's two decades of civil violence. More recently, *Antigone in Ferguson* (2016) recontextualized Sophocles' tragedy in the aftermath of Michael Brown's killing by police in Missouri. Across these diverse settings, *Antigone* becomes more than an ancient tragedy—it is a living tool for dissent, mourning, and imagining justice.

Theatre's adaptability ensured its survival during the COVID-19 pandemic, even as in-person gatherings became impossible. Institutions of higher education like Northern Illinois University's School of Theatre and Dance transitioned to "Zoom Theatre," using online platforms for live or recorded productions while reimagining actor training for the virtual medium. Professionally, many smaller theatre companies shuttered, while larger ones pivoted to streaming services like London's *National Theatre at Home*, which offers global access to prerecorded productions. Major international theatre festivals, such as the Edinburgh Festival, were cancelled while others, like South Africa's National Arts Festival, offered online viewing experiences. The pandemic also spurred reflection on industry norms. In March 2020, playwright Paula Vogel launched *Bard at the Gate*, a digital theatre company dedicated to producing "plays that were too ambitious, too quirky, and too smart to be contained" (2021). Now in its third season, the company proves both the longevity of digital theatre and its potential to recuperate plays that fall outside of Broadway producers' narrow tastes. America's ongoing racial reckoning also impacted the theatre industry. On June 8, 2020, "We See You, White American Theatre," an open letter signed by hundreds of Black, Indigenous, and people of color theatre workers demanded industry-wide shifts toward anti-racist and sustainable practices. These developments highlight theatre's resilience as well as its potential for transformation.

In addition to its remarkable flexibility and its ability to connect the past, present, and imagined futures, theatre has a wide range of contemporary applications beyond traditional performance spaces. In the field of wellness, theatrical tools are used to promote compassionate care practices. For example, actors often serve as standardized or simulated patients to help train medical professionals—including doctors, nurses, physical therapists, and athletic trainers. Many educators who train these actors are themselves former or current theatre practitioners. Theatrical methods such as roleplaying, storytelling, and improvisation are also central to drama therapy, a professional practice used in therapeutic settings. Beyond healthcare, theatre has proven valuable in communicating scientific and technological concepts to the public. Its techniques also influence modern business marketing strategies. Many employers seek skills theatre uniquely cultivates: creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, project management, and leadership. As generative AI continues to reshape the global job market, these human-centered theatrical skills may prove not only resilient but increasingly essential.

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1.5: Theatrical Roles

Theatre is arguably the most collaborative of all art forms. A single performance may involve dozens—sometimes hundreds or even thousands—of contributors, from the most visible actors on stage to the often-invisible craftspeople building scenery, running lights, or editing marketing trailers. Over time, these collaborative functions have become formalized into distinct creative roles or professions. While every production process is unique, most revolve around a core team: the playwright, the director, the performer, and the designer. These roles form the backbone of theatrical storytelling and production. In this book, we explore these four key theatrical roles through contemporary case studies to understand not only what these artists do, but also how and why they do it.

The Playwright

The playwright designs a blueprint for action—a written script that includes characters, dialogue, and stage directions. But playwriting is not solely about plot. Playwrights craft situations of conflict, populated by characters with irreconcilable desires and choices. The play exists not as literature alone, but as an invitation to performance—a plan that depends on others to bring it to life.



Figure 1.5.1: Mary Kathryn Nagle. (Copyright author)

Chapter 1 explores playwriting through the work of Mary Kathryn Nagle, whose play *Sovereignty* (2018) dramatizes the contemporary fight for tribal jurisdiction over crimes committed on Native land, while weaving in 19th-century Cherokee legal and political history. A member of the Cherokee Nation and a constitutional attorney specializing in tribal sovereignty, Nagle writes plays that are as politically urgent as they are theatrically compelling. Her work bridges her dual professions, using drama to challenge U.S. legal narratives and reclaim Indigenous memory and agency. *Sovereignty* not only tells a gripping intergenerational story but also models a decolonial form of playwriting grounded in Native storytelling traditions.

The Director

The director interprets the playwright's script and shapes it into a live performance. They guide the storytelling, often asking: Why this play, for this audience, at this time? Directors create a concept for the production, unify the work of designers and performers, and guide the rehearsal process. Their work is equal parts analytical, visual, emotional, and collaborative.



Figure 1.5.1: Mikael Burke. (Copyright author)

Chapter 2 examines the director's role through Mikael Burke's 2022 staging of *The Magnolia Ballet* by Terry Guest, produced by About Face Theatre in Chicago. Burke approached the script—a Southern gothic tale of race, queerness, and generational trauma—with a heightened sense of theatricality, using movement, memory, and magical realism to express the protagonist's internal conflict. Burke's background as both an educator and a Black queer artist informed his interpretation, allowing him to bring personal insight and cultural specificity to the production. His work demonstrates how directors can honor the playwright's vision while also imbuing a production with their own artistic and political lens.

The Performer

The performer brings the script to life through embodied storytelling. Guided by the director, actors use voice, movement, and presence to inhabit a character's truth under imaginary circumstances. Their work is deeply personal and intensely physical, requiring discipline, empathy, and vulnerability.



Figure 1.5.1: Alys Dickerson. (Copyright author)

Chapter 3 explores acting through the preparation of Alys Dickerson, who played Ophelia in American Players Theatre's 2022 production of *Hamlet*, directed by James DeVita. Dickerson's approach to the role combined rigorous textual analysis with an embodied exploration of Ophelia's emotional arc. Her training at Northern Illinois University and the Moscow Art Theatre School

informed her process, especially her attention to gesture, breath, and psychological realism. In a production staged outdoors and rooted in classical technique, Dickerson reinvigorated the famous role, highlighting Ophelia's agency and internal struggle within a patriarchal world.

The Designer

Designers interpret the director's concept to build the visual and aural world of the play. They create sets, costumes, lighting, sound, and media that help tell the story, shape the audience's attention, and evoke mood and meaning.



Figure 1.5.1: Marcus Doshi. (Copyright author)



Figure

: Wilson Chin. (Copyright author)

Chapter 4 investigates design through the 2017 Steppenwolf Theatre Company production of *Pass Over* by Antoinette Nwandu, focusing on lighting designer Marcus Doshi and scenic designer Wilson Chin. In a play that fuses *Waiting for Godot* with the Black Lives Matter movement, Doshi and Chin's work created a haunting, minimalist environment—an urban purgatory echoing both biblical myth and modern America. Doshi's lighting design underscored the play's tonal shifts, guiding the audience's emotional journey, while Chin's set—a concrete slab framed by looming streetlights—evoked a world of surveillance and suspended time. Together, their designs amplified the play's urgent social commentary and theatrical power.

Throughout this book, we'll return to these four central theatrical roles—the playwright, the director, the performer, and the designer—examining how they work individually and collaboratively to create meaning on stage. Along the way, we will explore the global histories of these roles, recognizing how different cultures define theatrical labor, artistic authorship, and the nature of performance.

1.6: Learning Check and Chapter References

Questions for Review 1.6.1

1. What does the introduction identify as the three defining qualities of theatre, and why are these qualities essential to how theatre functions as an art form?
2. What is *mimesis*? How does this human impulse help explain the origins and ongoing relevance of theatre?
3. Why do contemporary scholars caution against the assumption that theatre “naturally” developed out of ritual? What harmful ideas or historical assumptions does this view risk reinforcing?
4. How does the introduction describe theatre as a global cultural practice? Provide one example of a non-Western performance tradition and explain how it expands or challenges Eurocentric definitions of theatre.
5. According to the introduction, what allows theatre to remain meaningful and relevant in the contemporary world despite competition from digital media and new technologies?

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2: THE PLAYWRIGHT

Live theatre impacts people in a way that's harder to disconnect from, because you're right there in this shared human experience.

—Mary Kathryn Nagle, playwright

What Does a Playwright Do?

A playwright designs a blueprint for action. Like a wheelwright who crafts wheels or a shipwright who builds boats, a playwright is a *craftsperson*. Just as a skilled artisan follows both creative and practical steps to produce a chair, a bowl, or a Swiss watch, the playwright follows a thoughtful process to shape a playscript. But unlike those finished products, a play is not complete on the page. A script is not the art itself—it is a set of instructions for creating the art. The playwright's role is closer to an architect; architects don't build buildings, they show how buildings *can* be built. Likewise, playwrights don't make theatre—they show how theatre *can* be made. Playwriting is often seen as a solitary act, a lone figure scribbling by lamplight, deep in thought. And yes, many playwrights spend hours drafting scenes alone, like a shipwright quietly assembling a boat in their garage. But theatre is fundamentally collaborative, and a play cannot live on the page alone. The writer must eventually invite others in to read, interpret, perform, and bring it to life—like pushing that handcrafted boat into the water for the first time to see if it floats.

Beyond being a craftsperson, the playwright is a *storyteller*. Unlike the griots of West Africa, the *imbongi* praise poets of the Xhosa people, or the traveling bards of medieval Europe, playwrights rarely tell the story themselves. Instead, they create characters—people with desires, flaws, and conflicts—who interact through dialogue and action. These characters are embodied by actors onstage, who give voice and movement to the story the playwright has built. As we discussed in the introduction, storytelling is one of the oldest and most vital human technologies. If you want to understand a culture, pay attention to the stories it tells. Stories preserve a society's values, fears, taboos, and aspirations. From the *Mahabharata*, *Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Iliad*, to *Beowulf*, stories reveal who we are—and who we imagine ourselves to be. Human beings are obsessed with stories. We seek them out constantly, consuming them across every available medium.

But what *is* a story? A story is a *structured way of communicating experience and meaning*. It presents a sequence of events—real or imagined—that involve *conflict and change over time*. There are many ways to shape a story for the stage, and we'll explore some of those in the next section on dramatic structure. What matters most is that a story has some kind of internal structure, even if it appears chaotic or nonlinear. Immersive theatre experiences might seem loose or open-ended. For example, the marketing for *Punchdrunk's Sleep No More* (2011–2025) promised, “Audiences move freely through the epic story of Macbeth, creating their own journeys through a film noir world” (Punchdrunk, 2025).^[i] Yet, the freedom suggested by this adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in which audiences wandered around a warehouse styled as a 1930s hotel was in fact tightly structured. Every moment in a play is designed to guide the audience through a carefully constructed world.

At the center of this structure is conflict. Conflict arises when characters want things they can't easily have, especially when they want things from each other. The more urgent and irreconcilable these desires are, the more compelling the drama becomes. A playwright's job is to raise the stakes and sustain tension for as long as possible. For example, imagine I'm buying my morning coffee. I want coffee. The café has coffee. I have money. End of story. There's no conflict, no drama, and no reason to care. But if I forget my wallet, the café is out of coffee, or I desperately need caffeine before teaching an important class—then suddenly the stakes, however small, begin to rise. Still, these problems are minor. Most plays revolve around far more urgent needs: love, survival, justice, dignity. Finally, for a story to matter, *something must change*. Change gives a story its shape and meaning. Characters pursue their desires, encounter resistance, and are transformed by the experience. Without change, there are no stakes. No arc. No story. Now, if during my coffee run, I had a sudden flash of insight that led to a scientific breakthrough and saved millions of lives—*then* that moment might be worth dramatizing. Otherwise, probably not.

[i] In the late twentieth century, directors began experimenting with performances that occur outside traditional proscenium stages. The proscenium theatre, dominant in Western theatre architecture since the seventeenth century, frames the stage with a large arch separating performers from spectators. This structure creates the “fourth wall,” an invisible boundary that allows audiences to observe the fictional world of the play as if looking through a picture frame. Practitioners such as Richard Schechner explored environmental theatre, in which performers and spectators share the same space and the performance unfolds around the audience rather than in front of them.

- 2.1: Elements of Dramatic Structure
- 2.2: Global Histories of Playwriting
- 2.3: Case Study- Mary Kathryn Nagle and Sovereignty
- 2.4: Learning Check and Chapter References
- 2.5: Unit Assignment

2.1: Elements of Dramatic Structure

The structure most familiar in the West follows a straightforward sequence: beginning, middle, and end. This pattern mirrors Western ideas about life—birth, life, death—and carries with it the implication that stories should move linearly toward resolution. But this is not the only way to shape a dramatic experience. The Japanese aesthetic principle *jo-ha-kyū*, for example, also divides performances into three parts, and is often compared to beginning, middle, and end. Yet, it is far more intricate. As scholar and Nōh dancer Kunio Komparu writes, “the concept of *jo-ha-kyū* unifies the contradiction of the essentially opposing concepts of space and time, binding them with a breaking element” (Komparu 1984, 25). Roughly translated to “slow, break, fast” *jo-ha-kyū* governs not only the arc of an individual play in the Japanese dance drama style called Nōh but also the structure of an entire evening of performance—and even the parts within each play. Each *jo* contains its own *jo-ha-kyū*, as does each *ha* and each *kyū*. This fractal-like layering results in a carefully controlled rhythm: a slow introduction, a building momentum, and a swift, often sudden, conclusion. Indian Sanskrit dramas offer a model of dramatic structure more focused on emotional transformation than narrative progression. According to the *Nāṭyaśāstras*, the ancient treatise attributed to the sage Bharata Muni, drama works by stimulating specific emotional states, or *bhāvas*, in the characters that create corresponding aesthetic experiences, or *rasas*, in the audience. Through these *bhāvas*, “the inner idea of the playwright is made to pervade [the mind of the spectators] by means of Words, Gestures, color of the face and Representation of the Sattva [the quality of goodness]” (Ghosh, trans. 1950, 7:2, original emphasis). Feminist dramaturgies pose another, more cyclical model. For example, the plays of Ntozake Shange, Caryl Churchill, María Irene Fornés, and other feminist writers reject linear plot development in favor of repetition, fragmentation, ritual, or return—structures that resonate with feminist critiques of patriarchy, time, and narrative authority.

These feminist structures react against the linear approach formalized by the German playwright Gustav Freytag. In his 1863 treatise, Freytag outlined what is now commonly known as Freytag’s Pyramid.^[i] According to Freytag, the structure of drama “rises from the *introduction* with the entrance of exciting forces to the *climax*, and falls from here to the *catastrophe*” (MacEwan, trans. 1900, 114). His model has been adapted, critiqued, and reinterpreted by artists and theorists over the years, but its foundational arc remains. Stories structured in this mode typically begin with a moment of stasis or exposition, a glimpse into the world before the story truly begins. In Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) Belle sings of her “poor provincial life” as she makes her way through her town. In *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, Bilbo Baggins enjoys a quiet moment with his pipe in his cozy Hobbit hole. In Pixar’s *Inside Out* (2015) Riley’s emotions—Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger, and Disgust—navigate an ordinary day in the mind of an 11-year-old Minnesotan. Then, something shifts. An inciting incident disrupts the norm and sets the story in motion. Belle’s father gets lost and is imprisoned by a monstrous beast. The wizard Gandalf knocks on Bilbo’s door with an adventure in tow. Riley’s family moves cross-country to San Francisco. What follows is the rising action, a series of complications and escalations. Belle tames the Beast but must return home to care for her father. Bilbo faces goblins, spiders, and elves—and discovers a mysterious ring. Riley struggles to find her footing in a strange new city. At the peak comes the climax, a decisive turning point. Gaston and the Beast battle for Belle’s love. The Dragon Smaug’s defeat spirals into the Battle of the Five Armies. Riley nearly runs away but turns back just in time, as Joy and Sadness reunite inside her mind. Finally, there is the falling action, or denouement. Belle’s kiss lifts the curse. Bilbo returns home to write his memoirs. Riley settles into her new life, with puberty waiting just around the corner.

This structure covers many of the stories we encounter daily, including those we might scroll past on social media. For example, a four-part TikTok video that went viral in March 2021 begins with Samantha Hartsoe in her New York City apartment. She notices cold air blowing and locates its source as her bathroom mirror. The video ends with her telling the viewer, “Let me show you what I found in my New York City bathroom” (Hartsoe 2021). In the second video, she removes the mirror and uncovers a hole leading to another apartment. She prepares to go through the hole wearing a face mask and gloves with a flashlight taped to her head and carrying a hammer. In the story’s climax, the third video, she travels through the hole as her friend films her. The final video reveals what she found on the other side. Rather disappointingly, it’s only an unfinished apartment. This series of videos is epic in scale compared to the average viral video depicting only a few seconds of rising action and promising a climax should we click on the link in the comments. Once you understand this linear story structure, you will see it everywhere. You may even become aware of how you consciously or unconsciously structure narratives about your experiences in a similar fashion, casting yourself as the protagonist, marking off various achievements, and capping different “eras.” This is the power of storytelling. Stories define the outer limits of what is possible in each society and structure how the members of that society think both individually and collectively.

[i] The dramatic structure commonly known as *Freytag’s Pyramid* was proposed by nineteenth-century German critic Gustav Freytag. It describes a five-part narrative structure—exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution—based on his analysis of classical and Shakespearean tragedies.

2.2: Global Histories of Playwriting

Studying the history of storytelling—especially embodied or performed stories—reveals much about the society that produced them. Yet, any attempt to write a short global history of playwriting must begin by acknowledging the enormity—and in some ways, the impossibility—of the task. As we’ve already discussed, theatre has long been intertwined with ritual, and separating the two can be difficult and arbitrary. Who counts as a playwright depends on how we define a play. Western theatre historians have often privileged written text over oral tradition and individual authorship over collective creation. But if we define a playwright as someone who designs a blueprint for action, then most of the world’s playwrights are anonymous—priests, poets, scribes, monks, storytellers—whose works were never written down or whose names have been lost to time. Taking this wider view exposes the notion of a single-authored play as a Western construct fueling myths of white male genius. Shakespeare frequently wrote with collaborators just as Michelangelo employed assistants and apprentices to help him paint the Sistine Chapel. These facts do not diminish their accomplishments. They remind us that artwork does not happen in a vacuum. Artists require collaborators. Furthermore, the survival or destruction of any work of art is often a matter of colonization, deliberate suppression, or historical accident, rather than merit.

Roots of Theatre and Drama

The *Triumph of Horus*, an ancient Egyptian ritual drama so named by two British Egyptologists, survives not because the Egyptians memorialized its playwrights, but because they carved the script into the Temple of Edfu’s stone walls thousands of years after the drama’s probable first performance (Blackman and Fairman 1942–1944). Likewise, in ancient Greece, the identities of some playwrights have survived because of monuments and medieval manuscripts. The record is incomplete, but the fragments suggest the vast scale of playwriting in the ancient Mediterranean world. Thousands of plays were likely written by hundreds of playwrights in this region over several centuries. Of these, only forty-six complete plays remain from five playwrights: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, and Menander. Those five playwrights and their forty-six plays represent a veritable treasure trove when compared to the countless practitioners of other ancient traditions about whom little to no evidence survives. Nothing is known about the playwrights who wrote the *Rabinal Achí*, a 15th-century K’iché Mayan play, among the world’s oldest continuously performed dramas. Nor do we know the names of the composers of the Japanese Shinto *Kagura* dances that predate *Nôh*, or the Yoruba communities sustaining *Egungun* masquerades honoring ancestors, the organizers of Indigenous Australian ceremonies, and the performers of ancient Polynesian dances. In the face of these incalculable losses, any global history of playwriting must also reckon with a history of disappearance.

With so much anonymity and fragmentary evidence, this history must offer more than a catalogue of names. We need to have a sense of what these playwrights were trying to do. Given the patchwork nature of the surviving record, scholars can only guess at the civic and philosophical purposes of theatre in the ancient world. The *Triumph of Horus* appears to have been intended to knit together the Upper and Lower kingdoms of Egypt under one pharaoh and tie that leader to the worship of the god Horus. Horus engages in ritual combat with his uncle Seth, and the audience responds to a series of call-and-response choruses, reaffirming their fealty to the pharaoh. Extant ancient Greek plays provide a similar glimpse into the interplay between the stage and the body politic of 4th and 5th century BCE Athens. Writing a century after the so-called golden age of Athenian drama, Greek philosopher Aristotle theorized that tragedy dramatizes the fall of a person who is neither entirely good nor bad from a high place to a low one, evoking pity and fear and resulting in *catharsis*, or emotional purging. This, he suggested, made audiences stronger and more socially useful, better citizens. The center of Greek tragedy is the *agon*, the argument between two opposing forces. In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, for example, the central conflict is between Antigone, who represents the will of the gods in her desire to bury her brother, and her uncle Creon the king, who represents the laws of men in his command that her brother should rot. Their conflict reaches its climax in the *agon*, an extended scene where Antigone and Creon debate the merits of their positions. This ends in tragedy. Creon buries Antigone alive and consequently loses his son, his wife, and his kingdom. The late Brazilian director Augusto Boal critiqued Aristotle’s model of tragedy as coercive. In Boal’s view, “Aristotle formulated a powerful purgative system, the objective of which is to eliminate all that is not commonly accepted, including the revolution, before it starts” (Boal 1993, 47). Tragedy offers a binary choice between two opposing views and in doing so prevents any meaningful change or challenge to state power. Like the Egyptian ritual dramas that sought to reinforce a political order through call-and-response, Greek tragedy seems to have served a similar function—only through dialogue and subtler forms of control.

Premodern Theatrical Traditions

Other premodern (before 1850 CE) traditions pursued different ends. Roman playwrights such as Plautus and Terence crafted

comedies for enslaved and colonized audiences as part of the Roman Empire's bread-and-circuses strategy. Yet as theatre historian Odai Johnson argues, these "low" comedies carried traces of empire's suppressed rage and trauma (Johnson 2009). In contrast, Sanskrit playwrights like Kālidāsa sought emotional refinement through *rasa*—a blend of emotion and sensation cultivated by the playwright to elevate the audience's experience. In medieval Europe, drama served didactic purposes, teaching Christian doctrine through mystery cycles and morality plays, often written anonymously. These plays also functioned as advertisements for the craftsmanship of the guilds that performed them. The ship builders told the story of Noah and the ark, the wool weavers guild sponsored the story of the shepherds encountering baby Jesus, and so on. Because these plays were also part of popular culture and served as tourist destinations, they could be paradoxically sacrilegious. The *Pinner's Play*, from the York Cycle, for example, uses Christ's crucifixion to announce the strength of their nails. During this period, the earliest known female playwright in Western Europe, a German nun named Hrosvitha adapted Roman comedies into Christian parables, though likely these were "closet dramas" intended to be read, not enacted. Meanwhile, in Yuan dynasty China, playwrights like Guan Hanqing used vernacular language and everyday characters to craft complex, emotionally driven social dramas. In the Muromachi period of Japan, Zeami Motokiyo wrote dozens of Nōh plays that mixed indigenous Shinto ideas with the more recent Zen Buddhist principles. He also ran a Nōh theatre company and authored several treatises on Nōh practice.

Early Modern and Modern Playwriting Practices

The early modern and modern eras of playwriting, roughly spanning the 17th to early 20th centuries, was shaped by print culture, colonial expansion, and the rise of the nation-state. Playwrights such as Shakespeare, Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Molière, Lope de Vega, Calderón, and Aphra Behn gained fame not only because of their dramatic innovations but because their work was circulated, printed, and canonized within emerging national literatures. These writers often wrestled with themes of governance, morality, and social mobility, using theatre to reflect on and shape public discourse. But even as they became fixtures of European theatre history, other voices across the globe were innovating in ways often overlooked by mainstream narratives. In the Americas, Mexican-born Spanish nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz used religious theatre in colonial Mexico to assert intellectual authority and subtly question gender and power hierarchies. In Japan, Chikamatsu Monzaemon wrote for the Bunraku puppet theatre, crafting domestic tragedies that blurred class lines and dramatized private suffering in a public form. In the Global South, the collision of colonialism and local performance traditions gave rise to new dramatic forms. In India, Rabindranath Tagore combined Bengali folklore, classical Sanskrit drama, and Western romanticism to critique colonialism and explore spiritual and national identity. In Nigeria, the Yoruba tradition of storytelling and ritual performance laid the groundwork for playwrights like Wole Soyinka, who fused indigenous storytelling traditions and religious rituals with Greek tragedy and modernist experimentation. Across these and other traditions, playwrights shaped and reshaped theatre, responding to colonialism, class conflict, and the rise of global modernism. While realism became the dominant aesthetic in Western drama by the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the plays of Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Elizabeth Robins, Susan Glasspell, and Eugene O'Neill, playwrights from the global majority, such as Angelina Weld Grimké, Rabindranath Tagore, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Aimé Césaire, Alice Childress, Amiri Baraka, and Wole Soyinka, often employed more poetic, symbolic, hybrid, or ritual-inflected modes of storytelling, complicating the singular narrative of modernity.

Global Postmodern Playwrights

In the postmodern era, from the mid-20th century to today, global playwriting has expanded in both form and voice. As formerly colonized nations gained independence, playwrights emerged who decolonized not only content but form, rejecting the Aristotelian model in favor of circular, episodic, and participatory dramaturgies. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o rejected writing plays in English and instead created community-based works in Gikuyu, grounded in collective experience and anti-imperial resistance. Inspired by Japanese Kabuki dance, German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht developed epic theatre with his collaborator Irwin Piscator. This form of theatre sought to conscientize the audience by calling attention to the constructed-ness of the performance and making the familiar strange. In South Africa, Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona, as well as Fatima Dike, Mbongeni Ngema, Percy Mtwa, Matsemela Manaka, and Zakes Mda dramatized apartheid's human rights abuses using fragmented structure and multilingual dialogue. Meanwhile, Black American postmodernists Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange broke Western traditional forms entirely, blending poetry, dance, and song to center Black womanhood as both aesthetic and political practice.

Global playwriting today is increasingly transnational and intersectional. Wajdi Mouawad, a Lebanese-Canadian playwright, uses family trauma and myth to investigate war, displacement, and identity. In Latin America, post-dictatorship playwrights such as Griselda Gambaro and Guillermo Calderón use minimalist staging and fragmented narratives to confront state violence and historical amnesia. In the United States, Jackie Sibblies Drury, Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins, Antoinette Nwandu, and Tarell Alvin McCraney challenge the boundaries between actor and audience, representation and critique—forcing white spectators to reckon with their own complicity in structures of oppression. Suzan-Lori Parks reinvents history through repetition, revision,

and collage, crafting plays like *Topdog/Underdog* that merge myth with contemporary Black experience. Young Jean Lee stages identity as performance, playfully destabilizing categories of race, gender, and nation. Naomi Iizuka blends classical myth, pop culture, and nonlinear storytelling to explore migration, belonging, and hybridity. Elsewhere, Caryl Churchill continues to dismantle theatrical convention through fractured forms, while Nigeria's Femi Osofisan and Bode Sowande remix European dramaturgy with Yoruba ritual and storytelling. These and other contemporary playwrights do not merely update old forms, they dismantle and reimagine them, asking what theatre can be in a world fractured by colonial legacies and digital spectacle. At the same time, Indigenous playwrights and artists continue to reclaim and revitalize theatre as a tool for cultural survival and resurgence. Mary Kathryn Nagle uses legal history and storytelling to assert sovereignty on stage, while Larissa Fasthorse skewers white neoliberalism. Playwrights such as Paula Vogel, Taylor Mac, and Sylvan Oswald are reshaping the field with works that resist linearity and normative narrative arcs—foregrounding fragmentation, camp, and refusal as central artistic strategies. In these postmodern and contemporary practices, the playwright is no longer an anonymous scribe or single author but a cultural critic, world-builder, and often co-creator reflecting a global theatre that continues to challenge borders, genres, and hierarchies.

2.3: Case Study- Mary Kathryn Nagle and Sovereignty

Writing Native Histories for the Stage

Mary Kathryn Nagle's *Sovereignty* (2017) sits at the crossroads of law, history, and performance. She is not only a playwright but also a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and a practicing attorney specializing in tribal sovereignty and Native women's rights. These dual careers inform Nagle's writing. In her plays, court cases and historical memory are juxtaposed, dramatizing how law is not abstract but affects real people's lives. *Sovereignty*, commissioned by Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., as part of its Power Plays series, explores the legacies of the 1830 Indian Removal Act and the 1835 Treaty of New Echota, the agreement that led to the Trail of Tears. The play weaves together these nineteenth century events with a contemporary legal battle over tribal jurisdiction and violence against Native women. *Sovereignty* moves fluidly between centuries, linking historical figures like Major Ridge and John Ridge to their descendants in the present day. Nagle's dramaturgy emphasizes continuity: the struggle for sovereignty did not end in the nineteenth century but continues in today's courtrooms, households, and tribal councils. By collapsing past and present, *Sovereignty* refuses the idea that Native history is over. Instead, it highlights how colonial violence persists through legal structures, and how theatre can act as a site of resistance. As a case study, *Sovereignty* exemplifies how contemporary Indigenous playwrights reclaim theatre to tell stories that dominant historical narratives have silenced. Similarly, Canadian Cree painter Kent Monkman's 2025 exhibit *History is Painted by the Victors* at the Denver Art Museum appropriates the style and scale of Hudson River Valley paintings and historical paintings such as Emmaneul Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* to reassert Indigenous peoples place in the North American landscape and story. Nagle's *Sovereignty* also asks students to consider how performance interacts with law, politics, and lived experience. Her work demonstrates that a play is not simply entertainment but a political act, one that can both preserve memory and advocate for change.

“Fighting for the Same Thing My Grandfathers Were”: A conversation with Mary Kathryn Nagle

Mary Kathryn Nagle: My name is Mary Kathryn Nagle. I'm a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. I'm an attorney and a playwright, and I use she/her pronouns. I wrote my very first play as an undergraduate student at Georgetown University as a part of the Donn B. Murphy One-Act Playwriting Contest. I acted in high school plays. I acted in some college plays. I had never written a play before. When I won the contest and saw it produced—and it was a student theatre production, so imagine, people were acting on black boxes. But watching the actors bring it to life was incredible. In that moment, I knew that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

I didn't know how and I thought probably it wasn't possible for playwriting to be my profession. I've had a lot of conversations with other playwrights recently, and the truth is it is challenging to, in this economy and with the way theatres are structured today, to be a playwright and only a playwright and financially support yourself. Most working playwrights are also professors or teachers or baristas or, maybe they do some childcare on the side. I'm a lawyer. You could write in a TV show in a writer's room in L.A. But unfortunately, the reality is that unless you're Lauren Gunderson and your plays are being produced en masse, all over the country, it's not economically sustainable. That doesn't mean you shouldn't be a playwright, and it doesn't mean we shouldn't advocate to change the system so that it's more viable for artists, actors, designers, playwrights, directors, everyone.

I knew I loved playwriting, but I also didn't think that would be my profession for life. I also really wanted to be a lawyer. So, I went to law school. While I was in law school, I wrote and produced three plays, one each year, and I got my fellow students and faculty to act in the plays with me. It was a real community event. It brought the community together. People who had never seen a play before were laughing and enjoying theatre. These were law school student productions, so the costumes were things people found at Goodwill, and the set pieces were made of cardboard and painted. There was no funding. And it was some of the best theatre I've made in my life. I was at Tulane Law School, and it was after Katrina. All three plays were about Katrina and the impacts of climate change on New Orleans. I then left and thought, that's probably the end of my playwriting career.

I began clerking for a federal district court in Omaha, Nebraska. While I was there, I found a case from 1879 where a federal judge declared Indians to be persons under the law. I was so taken with this case I convinced the federal judge I clerked for to let me write and produce a play about the trial that we performed in the federal courthouse on the trial's 130th anniversary. In 2011, we were invited to bring the play to the Smithsonian Museum of American Indian in D.C. Someone there came up to me afterwards and said, “You live in New York.” I was living in New York at this point, working at a law firm. And they said, “You live

in New York. You're Native. You should apply to the Emerging Writers Group at the Public Theatre because they have a grant from the Ford Foundation to do Native theatre." I reached out to Liz Frankel, who was then at the Public. She told me a little bit more about the Emerging Writers Group. I applied and I got in.

That opened a lot of doors and I'm so blessed because that's how I got my agent. Then it took a few years after that. It was hard because I finished with the group and I had no productions, no commissions, nothing. I thought, I guess that was my playwriting career. Then a couple years went by, and I got a commission from Arena Stage. Molly Smith took a gamble on a playwright that no one was producing, and no one commissioned. That's when I wrote *Sovereignty*. That jump-started the career that I have now. Had it not been for Molly Smith commissioning me—it takes an artistic director who's willing take a risk on a playwright who hasn't been produced or commissioned before. A lot of artistic directors don't want to take that risk. They want to commission a writer who's already established. They want to commission Dominique Morreseau, right? You name the playwright that's known and has a high success rate, not the nobody, no one's ever heard of. Molly Smith really changed the trajectory of my career.

Gibson Alessandro Cima: Did you ask her what made the decision for her?

Nagle: The play I wrote for the Emerging Writers Group was *Manahatta*, which I wrote in 2012 when I was at the Public Theatre, which is ironic because it didn't get its first production until 2018 at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and it didn't get produced at the Public until 2023. 11 years after I wrote it. It's an interesting play in terms of how it impacted my career, because it took me a while, six years to get it produced after I first wrote it. But it opened a lot of doors. Molly [Smith] read it and said "this is a really talented writer. I want to commission her." She didn't say, "I want to produce the play," which was heartbreaking to me for a while. People kept saying, "I love *Manahatta*, we'd like to commission you." And I kept saying, "I'll write another play. But what about my beautiful baby right here that I love?" Molly [Smith] said she loved that, but she wanted something more D.C.-focused. It was part of the Power Plays cycle at Arena. I had to pick a certain decade, and it had to be about power. *Sovereignty* has the United States President from the 1830s Andrew Jackson. It focuses on Jackson's legacy and regime from the 1830s. It was slated into the 1830s slot in the Power Plays series at Arena Stage.

Cima: What was the kernel of the idea that became the play *Sovereignty*?

Nagle: This was a conversation I had with Molly [Smith]. She said, "What have you always wanted to write about?" When I interviewed for the Public Theatre Emerging Writers Group, I told them I wanted to write a play about my grandfathers, Major Ridge and John Ridge and how they fought to save Cherokee Nation, but were assassinated by their own fellow Cherokee Nation citizens, because they signed the Treaty of New Echota in 1835. Molly [Smith] asked, "Why didn't you write that play?" I started living in Manhattan and felt it was an atrocity that no one living there knew who the Lenape were. I lived in New York right when the Occupy Wall Street movement was happening, but no one knew why the wall was originally built. There were no land acknowledgement statements back then. There was no cultural expectation in the United States that you would identify or recognize who the historic indigenous land caretakers were or what tribal nation used to be there or still exists today. I wrote *Manahatta* because I thought this is the play that New York needs to hear. And ironically, no New York theatre would produce it for 12 years after I wrote it. I told Molly [Smith] that I got into the program on the Cherokee story, but then while I thought, "I'm in New York, I need to write this New York story." And Molly [Smith] said, "Why don't you write the Cherokee story now?"

She said, "What are you most passionate about this story?" Her wife Suzanne is from Yankton Sioux, which is a tribe in South Dakota. Suzanne's worked on the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). As a lawyer, I've also worked on that. Molly [Smith] said, "What about your work on the Violence Against Women Act?" I said "I'd love to write a play about VAWA, too." But I had my Cherokee grandfathers, the Cherokee Nation's Story of Survival, and VAWA, and they don't seem to connect. She said, "Talk to me more about that. Tell me about VAWA." I tell her about VAWA and what Sarah goes through in the play. I explain what VAWA is and how it interacts with Oliphant. Molly [Smith] sat there listening and then she said, "I think you're fighting for the same thing your grandfathers were." I got goosebumps. I said, "You're right. I am. I want to write a play about that."

The play itself is fictionalized. I'm not Sarah Ridge Polson. I didn't go to Yale Law School. I've never worked at the Cherokee Nation, and I've never argued a case in the Supreme Court. (I'd love to.) But that was my way of articulating the connection between Native women, or Cherokee women specifically, but any Native woman who fights for the restoration of tribal criminal jurisdiction today, and what my grandfathers fought for. These were my ideas, but they came out in a conversation I had with Molly [Smith]. I was a very new playwright. My first draft of *Sovereignty* was 190 pages. She didn't say, "Mary Kathryn, it's too long." It was too long. I knew it was too long, but I just had to get a lot out. She never batted an eyelash. She was never taken aback. Some artistic directors, they get a commission that's long and they go, "Oh my God, we'll never be able to produce this." It's okay, calm down. We're just starting the writing process. Nothing intimidated Molly [Smith]. She said, "Okay, let's dive in and there's some really amazing stuff here and let's get to work." It was a long process of rewriting because it was my first play that was produced at a full equity theatre of that size. It was an incredible experience.

Cima: I can imagine. Arena is one of the most prestigious theatres in the country. Can you talk to me more about that writing process. How long did it take you to get to that 190-page draft and how long afterwards did you have the production?

Nagle: The contemporary scenes in the play are all fictionalized. But a lot of the law and policy in the contemporary scenes is real. It's the work I do as an attorney every day. I'm an attorney for Native women who are survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault. I work with families of missing and murdered indigenous persons. I didn't have to research that part. A lot of what's in the scenes set in the past were stories that my grandmother told me as a child. And what was interesting was one of my good friends at the time who was Cherokee, Brenda Pipestone, told me, "You need to talk to Dr. Duane King." He's not Cherokee. He's a white guy from Georgia who grew up in her community. She's Eastern Band Cherokee; they're in Western North Carolina. He grew up there. He got his PhD in Cherokee studies and became fluent in the Cherokee language. He did a lot of incredible history research. So Brenda told me, "You have to meet Duane King." At that point, he was working at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma. They have a collection of papers called the John Ross papers. I had lunch with Dwayne [King], and he was the most knowledgeable person you could talk to about Cherokee history or politics.

I would tell him things such as my grandma growing up had a lot of resentment towards the Rosses and blamed John Ross for my grandfather's death. She said, "Everyone says the Ridges got rich off the Trail of Tears, but it was the Rosses who got rich, they made millions." I always thought that wasn't true, because no one else in Cherokee Nation would say that. I told Duane King that. He's said, "Oh yeah, I'll send you the paperwork." He had the government contracts signed between the federal government and John Ross's brother Andrew who made a million dollars because he outfitted the whole Trail of Tears journey. I thought, "Oh, I guess what my grandma said was true." Time after time, I remember my grandma said that John Ross canceled the elections because he didn't want John Ridge to win when they were in the middle—it's interesting how it reminds me of the whole Zelensky conversation right now—but that was John Ross's argument, "We're under attack. They're trying to destroy our whole nation. We will not have elections. Right now we're in a constitutional crisis." My great-great-great grandfather was the prime candidate to run against him, the opposing political party. He said, "This is a constitutional violation. We need to be able to hold elections." My grandmother always thought the Rosses were corrupt because they wouldn't hold elections. Duane King told me, "Oh yeah, here's the newspaper publication on that."

We became close friends. He brought me into the Gilcrease Museum to read the Gilcrease papers. There were handwritten letters. The originals. From John Ridge to John Ross when they were working together on the Worcester case in the Supreme Court. There were handwritten letters between Ross and William Wirt, the attorney who argued the case between John Ridge and William Wirt. They're all in the Ross Papers. Phenomenal. It's an amazing collection. I got to hold letters that my great-great-great grandfather wrote. I did a lot of research. I read a lot of books that have been published on the subject. The Cherokees were pretty lucky that we have a lot written about us. Not all tribes have as much material from the 1800s, or even before. All tribes have oral histories. I also talked to a lot of John Ross descendants, and I really wanted to connect with them. And I said to them, I'll share the script with you. Obviously, it was coming from a Ridge perspective, but I wanted to be fair to the Ross side. I wanted to show how both sides were trying to save a nation.

I mapped out what happened, starting with John Ridge in boarding school, meeting his wife, coming home, working for his dad. John Ross is also under the tutelage of Major Ridge. They're like family, and then the Governor of Georgia starts making the government illegal, making it illegal for non-Cherokee citizens to come into Cherokee Nation territory. At the beginning, they're unified. They take their case up to the Supreme Court, they win, and Andrew Jackson isn't going to enforce it. I was watching CNN a couple weeks ago and they were talking about it because all these judges are blocking different Trump executive orders. And Jake Tapper on CNN said, "There's that proverbial line from the whole Cherokee case about, Andrew Jackson said John Marshall made his ruling, let him enforce it." Then they started having this conversation about whether or not Andrew Jackson ever actually said that. I thought, "Hey, first of all, does it matter? Second of all, people wrote it down at the time. If he didn't say that, he said something pretty damn close to that, and then that's what he did." It's funny how people can become hyper-focused on something like that from history. But it was funny to see that on CNN because, in many ways, history just repeats itself.

Cima: So, how did you go about revising the draft?

Nagle: I started focusing on the central driving point of the play. I collapsed a lot of scenes. A lot of what I wrote was historically accurate. I had scenes with John Ross visiting Andrew Jackson in the White House that happened, but then we didn't have space for it. Some of the conversations between the Cherokee men in the past, what took place in three or four conversations were collapsed into one. You have to do that in theatre. You have to move things along. It's different in film. You can flash for four seconds over here and then move for an eight second conversation over here. You can do that in theatre, but it's a different type of theatre. I wanted the moments to have more breath to them. I had to cut a lot and I had to collapse and not fictionalize things, but just change the way in which some of the story was presented to streamline it. I had a lot of scenes where different members of Congress came to meet with Andrew Jackson about the Indian Removal Act. It was *All the Way* [by Robert Schenkkan], but instead of LBJ trying to get the Civil Rights Act passed, it's Andrew Jackson trying to get the Indian Removal Act passed, which

was fascinating to see him politicking, to get that piece of legislation through Congress. It narrowly passed, I think by one vote. It was fascinating to me to learn about all these machinations that Jackson went through to get this done, most of which I learned from Duane King. When you're writing historical fiction, David Henry Hwang, I think, said it well, you do all the research and then you go away and you never look at it again. A play is not a non-fiction history book. It's a work of art. You've got to massage it all into an artistic story and you can't keep checking back thinking, what was the exact transcript of this meeting or what are the five meetings that happened in what order, and how do I get every single detail? You just have to dive into the world and write it.

Cima: Can you talk about why you choose to write plays? Why the theatre? Why not write an article or write a book?

Nagle: I think that there's something very different that happens in a theatre experience, different than reading an article, different than watching a movie. At these last Oscars. I think people are a little bit traumatized in this country right now, and many of the artists that were getting awards were speaking about the need to hold and cherish the experience of sitting in a theatre and watching a movie and laughing and gasping. Well, live theatre is like that times ten. When the performers are right there in front of you going through the moment, it is so much more palpable. I think it impacts people in a more significant way. I think our challenge for theatre is not how to make better theatre, it's how to make it more accessible and how to get more audiences into the theatre, including, folks who are not progressive minded, who don't want to see theatre for all voices, who are really happy that Trump has gotten rid of all the DEI. Theatre needs to welcome those people, too. That's one of the only ways that some people's hearts and minds are going to change about other people is through the humanization of their stories. That can happen through film and TV as well, but I think live theatre impacts people in a way that's harder to disconnect from because you're right there in this shared human experience.

Cima: You're someone that uses theatre. You're also a lawyer who is actively involved in social justice. How does theatre function for you as a vehicle for social justice?

Nagle: When I appear at a hearing or a trial as an attorney, that's performance too. That's theatre. It certainly helps me perform better in those settings because I understand storytelling. You're in the same room as the judges. Everything they see, everything they hear, the rhythm, not just the words you say, but how it's presented to them, impacts what they end up deciding. But we also have a lot of work to do around our issues before we end up in a courtroom or before we end up in a Senate hearing. Because if people are going into those moments with ignorance or prejudice, then bad outcomes are more likely. And theatre is an amazing way to educate people.

I didn't anticipate this or fully appreciate it until now, but I also think that having students read my plays is an incredible way that theatre can work for social justice, because I've had a lot of friends and colleagues ask if I can send them my script so their students can read my plays. High school teachers reach out to me. I think that's largely because a lot of high school teachers go to OSF and other theatres where my plays have been produced. Then they say, "I want to teach this to my students." That means you've got all these kids in a class, many of whom may never go see a live play. But they're taking a theatre class. They may never professionally work in the theatre field—maybe they'll go watch theatre—but they're reading your play now. They're learning about an issue for social justice that they're not going to get anywhere else. I think that's an incredible tool, seeing plays used in classrooms.

Cima: Have you had women come up to you and say that they recognize themselves in Sarah?

Nagle: Yes. The interesting thing, too, is that women of all walks of life have approached me. One of the challenges we had in trying to get theatres to do Native plays is some of them would say, "You're such a small percentage of the population. Who's going to buy tickets to a Native play?" They were thinking, "We do a black playwright, there's a lot of black audience members. If we do a white playwright, obviously there are a lot of white people in the audience." I thought it was crazy. All the people who are not Native, because most of the people in this country are not Native, they would say, "Oh my gosh, this character of Sarah really resonates with me. I really feel like it's my story." I was always amazed by that because her story is very particular. But yes, she resonated with a lot of women.

Discussion Questions 2.3.1

1. Nagle draws parallels between her legal work and playwriting. How does her approach to storytelling bridge these two professions?
2. In what ways did personal history and family stories shape the creation of *Sovereignty*?
3. How does Nagle's process of historical research inform her fictionalized storytelling, and what does this suggest about the role of accuracy in theatre?

4. Nagle talks about accessibility and reaching audiences beyond those already aligned with progressive causes. How might theatre practitioners work toward this goal?
5. Why do so many non-Native women feel that Sarah's story is their own? What does that say about the theatre's ability to tell stories that feel simultaneously universal and particular?

2.4: Learning Check and Chapter References

Questions for Review 2.4.1

1. A playwright creates a “blueprint for action.” How does this idea expand or complicate your previous understanding of authorship, and how might your thinking continue to evolve as you encounter more collaborative or collective forms of theatre-making?
2. Several structures are presented. Which dramatic structure—Freytag’s Pyramid, jo-ha-kyū, rasa theory, feminist and postmodern forms—feels most familiar or unfamiliar to you, and what might you gain by experimenting with a structure that challenges your habits of storytelling?
3. The chapter reframes global playwriting history as marked by loss, colonization, and anonymity. How does this perspective shift your understanding of whose stories “count,” and how might you continue to question inherited theatrical canons in your own studies?
4. Conflict and change are central to story. Where do you see these forces at work in your own life or community, and how might developing your awareness of conflict and transformation strengthen your analytical or creative skills?
5. In the case study of *Sovereignty*, theatre serves as a political and legal intervention, not solely entertainment. How does this challenge your assumptions about what theatre can do, and what steps could you take to more deeply explore theatre’s potential as a tool for cultural memory, critique, or change?

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2.5: Unit Assignment

Overview

For this project, you will write an original three-page play that uses the structure and conventions of a morality play—a medieval dramatic form that uses allegorical characters to explore ethical dilemmas. Your task is to bring this form into a contemporary world by combining its recognizable features with themes, conflicts, and social issues that matter to you and your peers right now.

Part 1: Concept and Source Inspiration

Choose a story, myth, parable, or fairytale that resonates with a real issue in your life or community. You may use well-known material (e.g., The Tortoise and the Hare, Little Red Riding Hood, Pandora’s Box) or something from your own cultural background.

As you brainstorm, identify:

- A contemporary issue you wish to highlight (e.g., burnout, social media addiction, climate anxiety, impostor syndrome, housing insecurity, student debt).
- A moral or lesson your play will explore.
- Why does this story matter to you, and why should it matter to your audience at this moment?

Part 2: Adapting the Morality Play Format

Your play should clearly signal its connection to morality play traditions. To keep the form legible, consider including the following classic elements:

- Allegorical characters whose names reflect their functions or traits (e.g., Ambition, Doomscrolling, Prudence, Self-Doubt, Joy, Procrastination)
- A central protagonist (Everyperson or a contemporary “Everyman” figure—e.g., Student, Applicant, Roommate, Neighbor)
- A moral journey in which the protagonist encounters forces that pull them toward clarity or confusion, virtue or vice
- A crisis or turning point where the protagonist must choose a path
- A takeaway—not a heavy-handed “moral,” but a clear thematic resolution or open-ended question that leaves the audience thinking

You do *not* need to imitate archaic language or religious themes. Instead, adapt the structure in ways that feel relevant, surprising, and true to your voice.

3: THE DIRECTOR

Your job as a director is to make sure that something is happening, it's clear, and you can see it.

— Mikael Burke

The Director's Role in Theatre-Making

Chicago-based freelance director Mikael Burke defines the director's task as ensuring there is action on stage and that the audience can follow that action. As we learned in the previous chapter, the playwright designs a blueprint for action. Playwrights imagine characters, give them backgrounds, circumstances, and desires, and place them in dramatic situations where they pursue what they want from one another over the course of a narrative journey. The director takes the playwright's work and interprets it, creating a concept for a fully realized theatrical production, and answering the fundamental question, "Why this play, for this audience, at this time?" We'll discuss the director's concept in more detail in the section on contemporary directing practices. Directors guide the collaborative process that transforms a script into a live event. While the playwright supplies the text and the performers embody the characters, the director shapes the overall meaning and experience of the performance for the audience. The director is sometimes seen as a dictatorial position, but this does not have to be the case. Some directors are more collaborative than others. With devised work, there may be no playwright and no predetermined script, only the artists in the room. These kinds of projects may have directors who guide the playmaking process, or the group may hold that position collectively, as is the case for Sheffield, UK-based troupe Forced Entertainment.^[i]

Directors work at the intersection of artistry and leadership. Like playwrights, they are storytellers. They analyze scripts to uncover themes, images, and rhythms, and then translate those discoveries into choices about staging, design, and performance style. At the same time, they lead a creative team—designers, actors, stage managers, and technicians. The director's point of view on the story told by the play guides these multiple perspectives. Developing this point of view or concept takes time and requires effort. The director's responsibilities begin well before rehearsals start. Directors need to become experts in the play they plan to direct. They may research the historical or cultural context of the play, study the nuances of the script, decide on casting approaches, and collaborate with designers to establish the world of the production. During rehearsals, directors guide actors in developing characters, mapping the patterns of their on stage movement, and refining moments of dramatic tension. They must balance offering clear artistic direction with fostering an atmosphere in which actors and designers can bring their own creativity forward.

The director's role is not fixed; it evolves across cultures and historical moments. In some traditions, as in Shakespeare's time, the playwright or lead actor assumed the director's responsibilities. Twentieth century American theatre directors such as Richard Forman, Lee Breuer, Anne Bogart, and Julie Taymor operated as auteurs whose personal style shaped their productions. Other directors from this time period rejected the auteur model. Lloyd Richards, who directed seminal productions like *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and *Fences* (1987) viewed his responsibility as a director "to illuminate the material, not to impose on it" (Freedman, 1987). Following this tradition, contemporary theatre often embraces more collective or devised approaches, where the director facilitates rather than dictates. Regardless of style, the director remains central to shaping how the play communicates with its audience. At its heart, directing is about perspective, point of view, or concept. The director asks not only "*What does this play mean?*" but also "*How should it live on stage right now?*" In answering these questions, directors help theatre remain a responsive and vital art form, continually reinventing itself in dialogue with the world.

[i] Some theatre companies prioritize ensemble creation rather than a hierarchy centered on the director or playwright. Groups such as The Wooster Group and Complicité develop performances collaboratively through improvisation, physical experimentation, and collective dramaturgy.

3.1: Contemporary Directing Practices- Thinking Conceptually

3.2: Global Histories of Directing

3.3: Case Study- Mikael Burke and The Magnolia Ballet

3.4: Learning Check and Chapter References

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3.1: Contemporary Directing Practices- Thinking Conceptually

There are as many approaches to directing a play as there are directors directing plays today. Despite this great variety in contemporary directing practices, there are some overarching steps to directing that are, if not universally shared, at least generally agreed on. Of these practices, arguably the most important aspect is the development of the director's concept. The director brings their concept of the play to the actors and designers as a starting point for their collaboration. A director's concept is an idea of the play's dramatic action married to a central unifying image. At a fundamental level, the director needs to interpret what happens in the play and be able to communicate that interpretation to the actors and designers in a visual way.

To understand a play's dramatic action, directors analyze the script, asking themselves what is the change that occurs to the main character. Directors should be able to express a play's dramatic action in a short, clear sentence. For example, in Terry Guest's *Magnolia Ballet* (2022), Z, a young Black man, comes to terms with his sexuality and the ghosts of his past in a magical, gay fantasia. This simple sentence summarizes the plot or the series of connected events in the story, but it also provides a point of view on the story. It's not the only way that a potential director could summarize the action of *Magnolia Ballet*. Instead, it offers a window into the specific way that director Mikael Burke views that action. Another director might interpret the dramatic action differently. Rather than focusing on the magical aspects of the play, another production might instead highlight Z's journey from innocence to experience.

One way to think about a play's central image is to imagine the poster advertising the production. How does the poster tell the story of the play in one image? In the case of *Magnolia Ballet*, the poster depicts playwright Terry Guest as Z dressed in a beautiful ball gown holding a magnolia flower while Apparition, the ghost of his ancestors stands behind him. His father looks at him over his shoulder with his back turned as a cabin burns in the distance, a memory of the family's enslaved past. This conceptual image provides a jumping off point for the collaborations that will follow. That image of the burning cabin might cause the actor playing Z to think about the legacy of chattel slavery. They might begin to build their character around Z's struggle to break traumatic cycles of violence. A lighting designer might interpret the same image as menacing and they might design lights that tell that part of the story. The set designer might be attracted to the charred cabin and create a set that emphasizes decay, and so on. The director's concept knits these various artistic interpretations from different production roles into a cohesive artistic whole.

For example, several years ago, I witnessed a production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* at The Shakespeare Theatre Company (STC) in Washington, D.C. Perhaps the most popular of Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet* tells the story of two young lovers from warring families who try to overcome their families' strife with tragic consequences. As a life-long theatre-goer, I have seen *Romeo and Juliet* perhaps a dozen times in various iterations from a middle school production set in the 1920s to a professional production that inexplicably staged the central battle between the two powerful families, the Capulets and the Montagues, as a fight between rival garbage collectors who tossed bags of dog poop at each other. These productions have stayed in my mind for various reasons, not always because they were successful interpretations.

The STC production, directed by Associate Artistic Director Alan Paul stuck with me because its concept was crystal clear and led to holistically integrated production. Something was always happening on stage. I could understand and follow what was happening. In the program handed out to the audience as we entered the theatre, Paul laid out his vision for the production, arguing that the play is about two parties, one that happens at the beginning where the titular characters meet and one that doesn't happen at the end, Juliet's wedding to the ill-fated Paris. From that simple statement of dramatic action and central image of the upscale party, a conceptually integrated production emerged. The set designer created a contemporary party venue with red velvet carpets and a DJ booth. The sound designer pumped a soundtrack of club hits through the house speakers. The costume designer made both sides appear as if they were wearing rented tuxes. The lighting designer broke out the disco ball and the hazer. The famous prologue, "Two houses, both alike in dignity," was delivered by an actor who entered while vacuuming the party venue. Reflecting on the set, director Alan Paul stated, "I've seen this play done so many times on a completely gray set and I thought that was always an odd choice because it is about passion, and blood, and violence, and heartbreak, and the extremes of emotion. So, we have decided to put it on a set that is almost entirely red" (Paul 2016). Without explicitly stating the message, Paul conveyed much about how the play remains a contemporary indictment of privilege, violence, and family dysfunction. A good concept can rescue even a dusty old classic and make it feel fresh and new.

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3.2: Global Histories of Directing

The director's role as an artist who unifies text, design, and performance under a cohesive vision is a relatively recent innovation in the long history of theatre-making. For most of theatre's past, the tasks we now associate with directing were distributed among other figures: playwrights, performers, stage managers, or community leaders who organized the performance. In ancient Greece, for example, the *choregos*, a wealthy citizen funding the performance, hired a *chorodidaskalos*, or trainer who taught the chorus singing, dancing, and acting and who shaped the staging. In Sanskrit theatre traditions such as those described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. 200 BCE–200 CE), the *sūtradhāra* or “holder of the strings” served as both stage manager and ceremonial guide, introducing the play to the audience and maintaining harmony between performers, spectators, and the gods. This figure often appears at the beginning of the play in a short comic frame scene where they bicker with the actors and “choose” the play to perform. In early Xiqu from China, a *daoyan* (a term later adopted for “director”) coordinated music, gesture, and acrobatics, but the aesthetic and moral authority often rested with the lead performer. In Japanese *Nōh* and *Kabuki* traditions, the principal actor or *iemoto* (head of a performance lineage) shaped artistic decisions, teaching movement, rhythm, and gesture to the ensemble through demonstration. The expert literally manipulated students' bodies to pass on the embodied tradition.

In European contexts, directing as a distinct profession emerged alongside the rise of modern realism and the professionalization of the theatre industry in the nineteenth century. Georg II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen (1826–1914), a nobleman ruling over an area in what is now central Germany, is often credited with inventing modern directing through creating historically accurate set designs, ensemble-based staging, and a single unifying visual and interpretive approach to the text.^[i] Later directors like Constantin Stanislavski^[ii] in Russia and Bertolt Brecht in Germany developed distinct theories of actor training and audience engagement that continue to shape global performance practice. Stanislavski's “system,”^[iii] emphasizing psychological realism and internal motivation, became foundational to twentieth-century acting pedagogy, while Brecht's “epic theatre” challenged audiences to view social realities critically rather than lose themselves in emotional illusion.^[iv]

Colonialism and globalization further complicated how directing traditions traveled and transformed. In the twentieth century, directors across Asia, Africa, and Latin America fused Western dramaturgical structures with local storytelling forms, creating hybrid practices that questioned imported hierarchies of taste and technique. South African director Athol Fugard collaborated with performers such as John Kani and Winston Ntshona to devise politically charged works like *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (1972), blurring distinctions between playwright, actor, and director in a context of censorship and apartheid. Indian director Rustom Bharucha has written about how directors in postcolonial contexts must navigate between imposed Western-dominated training and indigenous performance vocabularies (Bharucha 1993), while artists such as Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan in Nigeria, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo in Kenya, and Augusto Boal in Brazil, have developed directing methods rooted in collective authorship and audience participation.

These global practices remind us that directing has never been a single, fixed role but a constellation of interpretive and organizational tasks shaped by culture, politics, and technology. In the digital era, directors may now collaborate remotely across continents or integrate live performance with projections, virtual reality, or social media. At the same time, many contemporary directors, like Chicago-based artist Mikael Burke, weave together dramaturgical analysis, lived experience, and social consciousness. Burke's work on *The Magnolia Ballet* exemplifies how directing continues to evolve as a global and local art form: one that asks not only *how* a story should be told, but *why* it matters here and now.

[i] Although theatre has always required leadership, the modern role of the stage director developed in the nineteenth century. Figures such as Duke Georg II of Saxe-Meiningen established the practice of coordinating acting, scenery, and staging into a unified artistic vision.

[ii] Russian actor and director Konstantin Stanislavski developed a systematic approach to acting in the early twentieth century emphasizing psychological motivation, objectives, and truthful emotional behavior. His work with the Moscow Art Theatre profoundly shaped modern acting training and influenced later techniques such as Method Acting.

[iii] Stanislavski's ideas were adapted in the United States by teachers including Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner. Their interpretations produced different acting pedagogies, often collectively referred to as “Method Acting,” which emphasized emotional truth, personal memory, or spontaneous responsiveness depending on the teacher.

[iv] German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht proposed *Epic Theatre* as an alternative to psychologically immersive realism. Brecht encouraged audiences to remain critically aware of the social issues represented onstage through techniques such as

direct address, projections, and visible stage mechanics.

3.3: Case Study- Mikael Burke and The Magnolia Ballet

Directing Queer Black Southern Memory

Mikael Burke's production of *The Magnolia Ballet* (2022) operated at the mystical intersections of race, masculinity, and queerness in the American South. Burke approaches theatre as both an artistic and social practice—one where he can confront his own demons while leading collaborative processes that confront systemic inequities. Though Burke cut his teeth directing classics and adaptations of ballets with his company No Exit Performance in his native Indianapolis, his recent work often explores how inherited histories shape identity, especially within Black and queer communities navigating the lingering violence of white supremacy. Written by Terry Guest and directed by Burke for Chicago-based About Face Theatre and the Phoenix Theatre in Indianapolis, *The Magnolia Ballet* blends realism, poetry, and movement to tell the story of a young Black man, Ezekiel, coming of age in rural Georgia. Haunted by family ghosts and the weight of Southern tradition, Ezekiel's search for love and belonging unfolds in a landscape still marked by racism and toxic masculinity. Burke's concept for *Magnolia Ballet* blends the coming-of-age story with a ghost story format to create a fantasia where different performance elements—flashbacks, dramatic scenes of dialogue, drag performance, direct address to the audience—combine to tell a single story. Under Burke's direction, the play becomes more than a story of one young man's awakening—it is a meditation on how fear keeps us from living as our authentic selves. Like Mary Kathryn Nagle's *Sovereignty*, Burke's collaboration with Guest transforms personal and collective history into theatrical language, using performance to challenge cultural myths about power, identity, and inheritance.

"Finding the Why?": Mikael Burke on Directing with Purpose

Mikael Burke: My name is Mikael Burke. I use he/him pronouns or anything respectful. I got into theatre when I was very little. My church growing up was a very small church. Seventy percent of the members were my immediate family. We would do Easter plays and Christmas plays. I think I was a tulip when I was four, a teal tulip. I was introduced to theatre from an early age. We didn't go see much theatre growing up. That came later. But I started doing it when I was young. Really, I was a choir kid. I was a music kid growing up. When I initially went to undergrad, I went for music. I was going to be a singer. But in college, I had a moment where I realized I like the act of singing. I don't enjoy the practice of being a singer. Then I started to think about, "Okay, what else do you like to do?" I thought back to those little plays we did when I was younger. I clocked that most of my friends, the people that I gravitated toward, were theatre kids, even though I wasn't explicitly a theatre kid. So, I changed my major to theatre and never looked back. The act of bringing to life another human being, that was the thing I loved most. I didn't know that until I took that plunge.

In undergrad, I was still acting but I also became interested in directing and made a concerted effort to direct a play by my senior year. That led to my first year out of school. Like a lot of twenty-two-year-old-about-to-graduate seniors in college, I was amazing. I knew everything, and I had it all figured out. So, I applied to twelve different internships and fellowships for directing at theatres all over the country and I got exactly zero of them. Instead of allowing that to defeat me, I said, "Okay, if you all don't want to bring me in to do theatre where you are, I'll just do it myself where I am." Some friends of mine and I started a small theatre company in Indianapolis, Indiana. We lucked out because my dear friend Catherine, who played Medea in my senior thesis production at Butler University, grew up in Indianapolis. Her high school theatre teacher came and saw her in *Medea* and said, "We'd love for you to do this show for our students." So, we did the show at their high school. Someone in the audience at that performance approached me afterwards and said, "I know a guy with an empty theatre on the east side of town. Y'all should come do shows there." We talked to him. That worked out. Suddenly, we lucked into having free theatre space for a year. We made plays with the little money we had, but we could do it because we weren't paying rent. That kicked us off. We merged with another small company in town that was run by other friends of ours. That combined company became No Exit Performance.

I was the Marketing and Associate Artistic Director of No Exit for four years. We devised plays from scratch. We did a lot of adaptations of classical ballets into theatre pieces. We produced some plays by playwrights that were alive, mostly playwrights that were dead, some Shakespeare. That is how I cut my teeth. I only assistant-directed twice prior to grad school. It was mostly me feeling my way through what directing is until I decided I wanted to go to grad school and learn all the things I didn't know I needed to learn.

Gibson Alessandro Cima: What made that decision for you?

Burke: I did a production of *Macbeth* and a reviewer in town named Lou Harry wrote a solid review of the piece. But the closing

line was, "This production has some of the most striking images that I've ever seen and things that I won't soon forget. But often with No Exit's work, I'm asking myself why?" The "why" is unclear. At first, I thought, "That's because you don't get it." But when I sat down and thought about it, I thought, "Wait a minute, that seems like an important piece of the puzzle that isn't making it across the gulf. So, what's up with that?" I wanted to figure that out. That was my impetus to get serious about applying to grad schools and going after what I wanted. That's what brought me to Chicago. I came here in fall of 2015 for grad school at the Theatre School at DePaul. That master's directing program no longer exists. It's a tragedy of COVID. I'm an endangered species now. But it was a great program. I learned a lot. I was a completely different director coming out of it than I was going in. It was exactly the right thing for me.

That's what launched me into the freelance career that I have now. I was very fortunate to have two professional shows in Chicago that premiered within one month of one another in my first season after I graduated. I was able to make a big splash all at once. I was very fortunate that the two shows I was working on were both good plays and plays that were right in my aesthetic wheelhouse. So, I got to come out, I didn't have to wait very long for people to see not just that I am a good director, but also these are the kinds of plays I am very good at directing. That all happened at once, and I think it opened some amazing doors.

Cima: What were the key takeaways from grad school?

Burke: It had been very easy for me to hide in the work and keep myself at a safe emotional distance. Grad school taught me if I'm not putting any skin in the game, then it's not going to be a very meaty thing I'm making. The production cannot be deeply felt if I'm not deeply feeling it, too. Not that I want to dump my trauma into every play, but there is something I find valuable about deciding which of your demons you are wrestling with. If it doesn't speak to you deeply, why are you working on it in the first place? It should be something that keeps you up at night that you want to untangle somehow in yourself.

Grad school helped me understand on a very basic level that when we're watching a play, we're watching something happen. Your job as a director is to make sure that something is happening and it's clear and you can see it. That means you have to make sure things are changing when they need to change, and it's trackable. That was revelatory for me in grad school. The "why" question is important. In retrospect, I think it's fortuitous that is the question that sent me into school, because it is the question I walked away thinking, "The only thing people really care about is the 'why' of it all." If you can talk to an artistic director and get them on board with the "why," then they're going to do what you want. If you can get an actor to get the "why" under their feet and in their guts, they're going to give a performance that's great. Even if you don't have enough rehearsal time to work the thing out, get the thing that fuels the fire and magic will ensue.

Cima: As you were building that career in Chicago, how did you get work? Did people come to you or were you reaching out to theatre companies? Were you pitching theatre companies with plays you wanted to do?

Burke: Both of those first two shows were built on connections I made during grad school. The networking, relationship-building piece of directing is the constant. My first "in" with About Face Theatre was my first year of grad school. One of my professors was the former Artistic Director of About Face, Bonnie Metzker. In my second year of grad school, About Face was producing a reading series and Bonnie put my name forward as a director for one of the readings. That got me in the room with the playwright Harrison David Rivers, who has since been very good to me as a human and friend and playwright. The most significant way I've gotten work as a director is at the behest of playwrights. When the playwright goes to the theatre and says, "You're doing my play and I think you want to do it with this director," that is the most successful way to open new doors.

I have pitched plays. The other first show I did in Chicago was one I pitched to First Floor. But in general, I find that the pitch is a diagnostic and triangulating tool more than companies are truly considering any of these plays that I'm bringing forward. Companies use it to hear how a director thinks and talks about plays to see, "Oh, you think about plays like I do, and so you'd be a good fit for this other play that I've got programmed two seasons down the line." Building my career has been some pitching, a lot of meetings, networking, conversations, and playwrights opening doors for me, which is beautiful. I invite people to see the work when the work is available. It's always awkward because you have to send the ask out for them to come see the thing before you know if the thing is going to be good. It's riddled with anxiety. But it pays off, and more people start to know your name and more people start to know your work. Your reputation starts to grow that way. Then, doors continue to open. I think all of that is true, and it's important to be a good human being that runs a rehearsal room that is not stifling or antagonizing, but is open, caring, and generative and playful. I think that word also spreads through the grapevine. And when people talk about what's it like to be in a rehearsal room, those are some things that come up.

Cima: Can you talk about how *The Magnolia Ballet* came about and how you got involved with that process?

Burke: Terry Guest, the playwright, and I met in 2018. We met because he auditioned for me, and I almost cast him, but I didn't. He sent me an email a few months later and said, "I'm also a playwright. I've got a play I'd love you to check out." As a director of

a certain amount of visibility, you get a lot of emails from playwrights that say, “I’ve got a play, and I’d love for you to check it out.” There’s a wide array of what those plays are and how fitting they are for you as a director. When Terry sent the email, I thought, “Okay, we’ll see.” But then I started reading it and usually I read 20 pages or so, and I know, “No, this isn’t for me.” And I couldn’t put this play down. That play was called *At the Wake of a Dead Drag Queen*, which I directed in 2019 with The Story Theatre. We just remounted it this past spring at the Raven Theatre. But that was my first play with Terry.

Then the pandemic happened when everything shut down. During that time, Terry got to cooking on some other new plays. The first one he had ready was *Magnolia Ballet*. He had a Zoom reading with some actor friends of his to just hear it out loud. He invited me. We know that watching any type of theatre on Zoom is okay at best and agonizing at worst. But I was blown away, because even on Zoom, I was knocked sideways by this play. It was so beautiful, even in that context. I called Terry and said, “I don’t know what plans you have for this play, but they will involve me. Let’s talk about it for real.”

Cima: Can you talk about the play a little bit for people that might not have read it?

Burke: *Magnolia Ballet* is a ghost story but not the ghosts that go bump in the night. They’re the ghosts that sit in the back of your head and question that choice you just made or that impulse that you have when you’re trying to live your own truth. That’s the voice of your parents or your grandparents saying, “That’s not how we do things. You gotta man up. You gotta sit the right way, speak the right way, act the right way. Even if it’s not the way that feels natural to you.” It’s a ghost story about that and about generational trauma and what it means to break those generational curses and find a new way forward that is not harmful. It tells the story of a Black teenager named Z and his dad. They live under the same roof, but that is about as far as their relationship goes. It’s very fraught between the two of them. Z spends most of his time at his friend Danny’s house. Danny is white and Z is secretly head over heels for Danny. But that’s the secret that he can’t say aloud to anyone. But everything gets turned upside down when Z and Danny are working on a history project. Z goes hunting in their storage shed for things to use for the project, and he finds letters that his granddad wrote seemingly to another man. That’s when the idea that Z’s personhood might be in his blood, and not this thing that is vehemently against his upbringing, opens a whole new world of possibility up. That’s the story. It goes to some wild places within that. But that’s the gist of it. It’s magic. It’s mystical. There are songs and drag. It’s lovely and funny and delightful, but ultimately very moving because we get to watch father and son, who cannot see eye-to-eye, figure out how to find each other through the flames. It’s beautiful.

Cima: Can you talk to me about your process of directing the play, and how you approached it?

Burke: That was one that I did pitch. I sent it to Megan Carney at About Face, and I sent it to the former artistic director of the Phoenix Theatre in Indianapolis, Bill Simmons. Both responded, “We want to do it.” So, I got to do it twice. It’s had many productions since then, because it’s a great play. My first chance to work with the play was when we did a live reading of it in the fall of 2021 at About Face with three-quarters of the people who ended up being cast in the Chicago production. I had the chance to do the reading before I got to do a full production. So, I had some familiarity going in.

But in either case, my directing process always starts out with first I read the play and then I reread the play and read it and read it. This is a phrasing I learned from Lisa Portes, but I love it, so I stole it: I go on dates with the play. I’m reading it and listening to it and watching it and observing and clocking “Oh, interesting. You’re really into this. You are not into this. You are not like this other play I know in these specific ways. You’re very like this one.” In that process, I have three analyses that I do. One is a dramatic structure analysis, asking what are the major story beats of the play and how does the rest of the narrative fall around these major tent poles? I do what I call a “small planet” analysis, which is an analysis based on the dramaturg Eleanor Fuchs’ essay “Visit to a Small Planet.”^[1] The idea is that none of us know how to read plays because we’re taught how to read books. She argues, “That’s not how you read a play. You have to read a play like you are visiting a new world. And none of the rules of that world are the rules of your world. You have to think of it like it’s a new alien planet and you’re an anthropological explorer and everything is fresh and new. And what do you observe?” Fuchs tells readers to make a small planet in their mind’s eye. It’s a fun exercise because suddenly reading a play is a scavenger hunt. There’s so much delicious textural information you can gain when you are paying attention to all the little clues hiding inside of dialogue. It’s not just lines, words that people are saying. There’s so much world-building happening in things we don’t always pay attention to when we’re reading the story. I do the small planet analysis and the dramatic structure analysis. Those two things combined give me a good sense of what the play itself is.

Another tool I learned in grad school called “Six Questions,” which is about compressing, condensing, distilling information into four questions about the play. What’s it about? What kind of play is it? What’s the story you’re following or what’s the dramatic question? What’s the spine, or what is the behavioral engine that the characters are operating on? Then I answer two more questions. What do I want to do to the audience? What do I think the play is trying to say—what’s the cry of the play? Those two questions are where I finally start to put my own spin on what I’ve learned. I do all of that because that’s what will ultimately enable me to be conversant enough in the play to start talking to other people about what we might be trying to do.

It's all to get myself to a clear starting line that isn't just, "I don't know what it is, we're going to do it together." Instead, I'm able to say, "I spent a whole lot of time with this thing, and I think it's this. So, we're going to start here and see if that's right." If we learn otherwise, we change and we grow from there. But I find that if we have a clear starting point and a clear end goal, a North Star as it were, we will get somewhere. Without it we float aimlessly. Those are the things I do to get myself ready to start moving through a process.

Cima: What was that North Star for *Magnolia Ballet*?

Burke: For *Magnolia Ballet*, the North Star was that the play is ultimately a coming-of-age story. It's a coming-of-age fantasia, because there are all these different performance elements and styles that are all working together to tell a single story. We have to figure out a way to be as true as possible to the onus and intent of this specific style versus that specific style, versus that specific style while also not losing the thread that they all have to work together. They have to blur and blend easily. We've got to be able to be as porous as the ground is in Georgia to make this play work. We want to create a world where anything is possible if only you're brave enough to believe it and just do it without fear of consequence. So much of what's going on in the play is how the fear of consequence impedes us from acting or saying or doing the thing that we really want to. We wanted to make a world that made that specific roadblock as palpable as possible, as unignorable as possible. There is one character in the play called Apparition who shows up as a myriad of things, who defies all these rules and expectations. Z is learning how to defy expectation. The only way we're going to break the curse is if we defy the rules that we thought were there to keep us safe in the first place.

Cima: How much rehearsal time did you have?

Burke: We had about a month. I think it was four weeks of rehearsal, about a week of tech, and then a week of previews with a little bit of tech time laced in. Six weeks in total.

Cima: And the playwright was in your production?

Burke: Yes, he was. He played the main character.

Cima: What was that like? Have you dealt with that before?

Burke: Only with Terry. Terry was also in *At the Wake* when we did that together. *Magnolia* was not our first time doing this particular dance. When we're in rehearsal, I am talking to Terry, the actor, and Terry is thinking as Terry, the actor. We both respect what that means in terms of the dynamics of how this thing is getting made. He's not necessarily constantly chiming in, "That's not how it was in my head." He's saying, "Great, I'm the actor. Let's play. Let's see what happens." I also am good at saying, "I have a playwright question. Terry, what do you think about X, Y, Z?" giving him that space or opening the door for that space. Working together is about acknowledging which hat we're wearing at which time, and having the respect and value for one another to not allow any of the hats we might wear to dictate things beyond the hat that we're wearing at the time. But then we can still have conversations about, "Hey, this scene in the play, I have questions about yada, yada, yada," outside of rehearsal. We would do that a lot as well. Outside of the strangeness of the playwright being in the play itself, it functioned pretty much like a normal process.

Cima: Playwrights ask for you. Do you have a particular way of working with living playwrights, especially on a first production?

Burke: My job as a director—and this is especially true when I'm doing new play development with the playwright, not just directing the first production of their play that for them is already done, but being in the process of making alongside them—I think my job is to tell the story that's on the page as clearly as I can so I can hold that up to the playwright and say, "Is this what you meant? Because this is what you have." I try to do that in a way that is honoring what the play is asking for, not what I think the play should be like.

When you are working on Shakespeare or something, it's easy to get caught up in what you want to do with the thing. Shakespeare doesn't care because he's not here. When I'm working on a new play, I make a concerted effort to make it as impersonal as possible. Obviously, I'm still finding my person in it, but it's not my play to solve right now. I am here to present to you the magic that you've put on the page and see if it's what you want it to be. I feel like that's the best thing for a playwright because they're among the trees, so they can't always see the forest for what it is. I get to be the one that helps them see the big picture of the thing they're making so they can go back and adjust and tweak and refine to get it to be the perfect thing we're all chasing. We'll do a reading or we'll even do a full production and I'll say to a playwright, "When I interpret this moment, he says this, and this happens this way and that makes me think that this is a scene about this, or it makes me wonder about this." I'm wondering why this character asked this question or doesn't ask this question. I'm trying to point to what I see and ask questions about what I am genuinely wondering about without trying to supply my own answers to any of those questions. It's not, "I think

it should be this.” It’s just, “I wonder about this thing. What are you gonna do with it now?” The playwright could choose to do nothing. But it’s my job to pose the wonder.

Cima: Are there important aspects of your directing that we haven’t covered yet?

Burke: What I love about the “Small Planet” exercise is that it allows you to home in not just on what the story is, but on *how* the story is. *Magnolia Ballet* is dreamy and other plays are not. Some plays are more argumentative, and some plays are more dictatorial. When you can home in on the mood and tone of the play, when you move into conversations with your designers and your actors, it gives you clear things to aim at for your choice making. I know for a fact that if I’m doing *Magnolia Ballet*, it has to feel dreamy. It has to feel unexpected and delightful. If we’re trying to make a choice about this particular transition, and I’ve got two options and one of them is a traditional transition, and the other one is weird and strange and alarming, the play wants that one. Even if I don’t know what that is yet, or why, I know it’s not the other choice because that goes against what this play feels like, what this play likes, what it gravitates toward. I get so excited and nerdy about that kind of thing in working with designers on bringing plays to life.

Cima: You’re a theatre director. You don’t tend to do film and television. Why is that? Why theatre?

Burke: I have a spiritual answer and a technical answer. The technical answer has to do with order of operations. In the theatre, I come up with an idea, an impulse, a concept that is a starting point for exploration. Then I get in the room with other people, and I watch and respond and react to what’s coming up in front of me, and that becomes the real generative space for what the end product looks like. Film and TV are the opposite. You have to know within 5% positive or negative what this thing needs to look like and feel like and function like and what the shots are going to be. You have to know all of that before actors get in the room. Because you only have this much time on set to make it happen. It’s not just you and the three actors in the room, it’s you and the three actors and the forty-five, fifty, hundred other people that have to do their jobs so that this thing can show up on camera. My brain doesn’t work that way. I watch film sometimes and I think, “This is great.” I don’t understand how you can know the shape of this scene before you show up on set and have the actor in front of you to figure that out. That’s the thing that baffles me. I’m sure someone somewhere will explain it to me in a way that my little brain can make sense of it. I need the collaborative creative impulsive theatre to make the thing, and then it’s live. I love being in a room and sharing space and sharing breath with people. There’s nothing better than a room full of people that have all agreed to sit down and play pretend together really well. It’s delightful.

[i] A dramaturg is a literary and research specialist who assists a production team by providing historical context, script analysis, and audience engagement materials. The position originated in eighteenth-century German theatre, particularly in the work of playwright and critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

Discussion Questions 3.3.1

1. How did Burke’s early experiences in music and church theatre influence his later work as a director?
2. What role did failure (such as not landing internships) play in shaping Burke’s career path?
3. How does Burke’s “small planet” approach to reading plays change the way a director might interpret a script?
4. Why does Burke emphasize the “why” as the most important question in directing?
5. What are the advantages and challenges of working with a playwright who is also acting in their own play?

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3.4: Learning Check and Chapter References

Questions for Review 3.4.1

1. How does the chapter define the director's central responsibility in theatre-making, and how does this role balance both artistic interpretation and leadership within a collaborative production process?
2. What is a director's concept, and how do dramatic action and a central unifying image work together to guide actors, designers, and other collaborators in shaping a production?
3. Describe one example from the chapter (such as *The Magnolia Ballet* or *Romeo and Juliet*) that illustrates how a strong directorial concept can influence staging, design, and audience interpretation. What made the concept effective?
4. How have directing practices varied across global and historical traditions? Choose one example from the chapter (the sūtradhāra, the daoyan, the iemoto, the choregos, Stanislavski, Brecht, etc.) and explain how that figure fulfilled functions similar to—or different from—those of a contemporary director.
5. In what ways does the chapter demonstrate that directing is not a fixed or universal role? How do culture, politics, technology, or collaborative structures shape what a director does and how a director creates meaning on stage?

Chapter References

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3.5: Unit Assignment

Director's Concept

Now that you have written your three-page morality-play adaptation, your next step is to think like a director. For this assignment, you will write a one-page, double-spaced Director's Concept that articulates your artistic vision for staging your fellow student's play. Your concept should communicate how you understand the story and how you would bring it to life onstage for a contemporary audience.

Requirements

1. Dramatic Action (What happens in the play?)

Provide a clear and concise statement of the essential action of the play. This is not a summary of every plot point, but a distilled explanation of what drives the story forward.

- What motivates the characters?
- What central conflict or moral struggle structures the action?
- What changes between the beginning and the end?

2. Central Unifying Image (How do you imagine the play onstage?)

Identify a visual, metaphorical, or conceptual image that captures the heart of your production. This image should unify your staging choices and give the audience a way to understand the play's world.

- Is your unifying image tied to a symbol from the original parable, myth, or story?
- Does it come from your contemporary setting (a school hallway, a smartphone screen, a corporate office, a protest line, etc.)?
- How does this image illuminate the play's moral argument?

3. Directorial Approach (How will you direct the play?)

Explain your approach to performance, staging, and actor–audience relationships. Consider:

- Will the style be presentational, poetic, realistic, satirical, or allegorical?
- How will you work with actors to convey moral choice and transformation?
- Will you incorporate conventions of medieval morality plays (asides, allegorical characters, direct address, episodic structure)? How will they be adapted to a modern context?

4. Background and Relevance (Why this play for this audience at this time?)

Connect the moral of the original story and the contemporary issue it's addressing. Your job here is to show that your production is purposeful, not accidental.

- What is the moral or ethical lesson the adaptation explores?
- What modern problem, challenge, or question does the play respond to?
- Why is this story meaningful right now, and to whom is it speaking?

5. Technical Elements (What should the audience see, hear, and feel?)

Describe how you imagine the design elements supporting your concept. You do not need to draw sketches; instead, use vivid language to show the aesthetic world. The goal is to demonstrate how your staging choices reinforce the story's themes and the morality-play structure. Consider:

Set

- What environment does the play occur in?
- Is it literal (a bedroom, a street corner) or abstract (a fractured moral landscape)?

Lighting

- What emotions, transitions, or moral turning points should lighting emphasize?
- Bright, stark, shadowed, warm, neon—why?

Costumes

- How do costumes reflect each character's symbolic or allegorical identity?
- How do they place the play in the contemporary setting?

Sound / Music

- Would sound help establish tone or highlight moral tension?

4: THE PERFORMER

Everything you do will enrich whatever role comes next.

— Alys Dickerson

The Power of Performance

In a 2012 TED Talk, South African mime Andrew Buckland lectured on the nature of conflict in drama while expertly—and inexplicably—engaging in an invisible tug-of-war with someone apparently just offstage. After a moment, he deadpanned: “The salient element of this demonstration was that, despite what you might think, there’s no rope.” Over the audience’s laughter, he added, “Importantly, there’s nobody at the other end pulling the no rope that we didn’t see.” As the room quieted, Buckland pushed the point further: “But I’m willing to bet that the majority of people in this room saw somebody there and, even more important, each person saw their own individual, unique nobody pulling the no rope that we couldn’t see—each one of us individually and communally activating our imaginations to imagine and visualize somebody who’s patently not there” (Buckland 2012).

Buckland’s elegant demonstration reveals the power of performance. Performance leads us—collectively and individually—into an imaginative act despite ourselves. We know there is no rope, yet we respond as though there is. When it works, performance seems like magic. Not magic in the sense of something otherworldly (though it sometimes involves the supernatural), but magic as a craft: a skill honed over years, made to look effortless. As discussed in the introduction, performance has deep roots in *mimesis*—the human impulse to imitate. It is tied to our capacity for symbolic thought and action, one of our key evolutionary advantages. Skilled performers have often, though not always, been revered across human cultures. With their bodies, voices, faces, and gestures as primary tools, performers can conjure worlds that influence our subconscious minds and invite us to imagine new possibilities.

British experimental theatre director Peter Brook famously wrote, “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and that is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (Brook 1968, 11). By this definition, in our digital age of hyper-surveillance, very few aspects of our lives fall outside the realm of performance. We might broadcast our morning routines in “Get Ready with Me” videos or cultivate an online persona through pranks, challenges, and daily vlogs. Even if we choose not to participate in digital performance culture, we are filmed dozens—perhaps hundreds—of times a day by doorbell cameras, traffic cameras, retail surveillance, and other people’s phones. We perform different versions of ourselves for our families, friends, classmates, and coworkers.

Performance encompasses everything from self-fashioning and digital encounters to Broadway musicals and blockbuster films to sacred rituals and children’s dramatic play. This book focuses on a narrower category: theatre as a live, embodied form of storytelling for an audience. Theatrical performers exist in every society, but what it means to perform and to be a performer varies dramatically across cultures, historical periods, and belief systems. While many students in the United States may encounter performance through social media, Western theatre, film, television, and music videos, the global history of performance reveals far broader possibilities. Appreciating these possibilities expands our understanding of what performers do and challenges narrow assumptions about acting, storytelling, and embodiment. It also reminds us that theatre has always been shaped not only by artistic influences but also by social, spiritual, and political contexts.

4.1: Performing Across Cultures

4.2: The Actor’s Toolbox

4.3: Case Study- Alys Dickerson Prepares Ophelia

4.4: Learning Check and Chapter References

4.5: Unit Assignment

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4.1: Performing Across Cultures

Performance emerges from specific cultural, spiritual, and social frameworks. These contexts shape not only *what* is performed but *how* performers are trained, understood, and valued. In some traditions, performers are ritual specialists who mediate between humans and the divine. In others, they are storytellers preserving communal memory, comedians whose improvisation engages the political moment, or highly trained virtuosos whose artistry is passed down through specialized lineages. For example, in Japanese Nōh theatre, performance is inseparable from Buddhist and Shinto religious practices transmitted across centuries. In West African griot traditions, performers serve as oral historians, genealogists, praise-singers, and social commentators. In Yoruba *egúngún* masquerade, performers embody ancestral spirits whose presence reaffirms communal bonds.^[i] Indigenous Australian songlines or dream tracks use performance to carry sacred geographical and cosmological knowledge. Performance in these examples exists not only to entertain but also to sustain and reshape communities, to preserve or challenge the status quo.

Different cultures hold distinct aesthetic ideas about what constitutes “beauty,” “realism,” “believability,” or “good acting.” These ideas are informed by religion, politics, and gender roles. For example, due to restrictions on and attitudes toward women’s participation in public life, many historical forms of theatre banned female presenting individuals from performing, including Greek tragedy, Japanese Nōh drama, Indian Kathakali dance, as well as the Elizabethan theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. In other forms, such as Roman mime, Japanese Kabuki, and English Restoration comedy, female contributions were marginalized, suppressed, or tightly controlled. These gendered restrictions offer an example of how culture shaped not only who could appear onstage but also the aesthetic conventions that developed within each tradition. A Nōh performer’s slow, deliberate gesture may convey meaning for an audience of connoisseurs, while a Kathakali dancer’s precisely controlled eye movements communicate a character’s *bhava* or inner emotional state.^[ii] In many traditions, the performer’s virtuosity lies not in reproducing everyday behavior but in mastery of form, rhythm, repetition, and symbolic detail.

Understanding these differences helps us appreciate performance on its own terms rather than through the lens of contemporary Western acting norms. Those norms, of course, have their own history. Responding to the industrial revolution and the rise of modernism, Russian actor and director Constantin Stanislavski (1863–1938), along with director Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko and playwright Anton Chekhov, rejected the presentational style of acting that had dominated Western theatre for centuries. Stanislavski sought a more psychologically rooted style that drew on the actor’s emotional memory, working from the “inside out.” His system continued to evolve throughout his life and after his death as students such as Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Uta Hagen, Sanford Meisner, Michael Chekhov interpreted and adapted his teachings in different ways. What audiences once hailed as the height of the craft of acting in the 1950s might now seem exaggerated and mannered when compared to the subtlety favored on many Western stages today. Acclaimed British actor Laurence Olivier’s Richard III as immortalized in the eponymous 1955 film was parodied by comedian Peter Sellers a decade later. Appearing in a similar costume and affecting Olivier’s famous cadence, Sellers recited the lyrics to “A Hard Day’s Night” by the Beatles to loud guffaws of recognition. Both Olivier’s performance and Sellers’ parody appear dated in the face of Zimbabwean-American actor and playwright Danai Gurira’s fresh and chaotic delivery of the same speech during her run as Richard in the 2023 Shakespeare in the Park production mounted by New York City’s Public Theatre. Performers everywhere are shaped by the worlds they inhabit, by systems of religion, politics, class, gender, sexuality, and history that inform their work and their audiences’ expectations.

Although performance traditions differ widely in practice and purpose, they share certain fundamental qualities. The anonymous priests who enacted the Egyptian ritual drama *The Triumph of Horus*, Thespis, the legendary first actor of Ancient Greece, Roscius, the Roman comedian, and Zeami Motokiyo, the master of Nōh, all have something in common with Shakespeare’s leading man Richard Burbage, tragedians Sarah Siddons, Henry Irving, and Ellen Terry, Italian icon Eleanora Duse, and French superstar Sarah Bernhardt. They are also linked to twentieth- and twenty-first-century performers such as xiqu master Mei Lanfang, dancer Michio Ito, Kabuki onnagata Bandō Tamasaburō V, Butoh pioneer Kazuo Ohno, Kathakali virtuoso Kalamandalam Gopi, griot and actor Sotigui Kouyaté, South African actor John Kani, and Broadway legends Lena Horne and Pearl Bailey, as well as countless other performers. Across eras and cultures, all these artists share the essential act of transforming themselves in front of others and inviting audiences into imagined worlds.

[i] The Yoruba *Egúngún* masquerade of West Africa is a performance tradition honoring ancestral spirits. Masked performers represent ancestors who return to advise and bless the community. These ceremonies combine ritual, dance, costume, and storytelling, illustrating how performance functions within religious and social life.

[ii] In classical Indian performance theory, *bhavas* are the emotional states portrayed by performers, while *rasas* are the emotional “flavors” experienced by spectators. Traditional theory identifies nine primary *rasas*, including love, humor, anger, fear, and

wonder.

4.2: The Actor's Toolbox

No matter the time, location, or form, actors rely on a common set of tools: their bodies, voices, facial expressions, gestures and movements, and imaginations. How these tools are cultivated, trained, deployed—and what they are meant to accomplish—varies by culture. Many performance traditions require years or even decades of disciplined study. The Nōh master Zeami Motokiyo wrote that students might begin their training at age seven and not fully master their craft until their mid-thirties. Kathakali dancers likewise begin in childhood to develop the muscular control needed for precise eye movements and expressive hand and foot gestures. Chinese *xíqǔ* performers must train in acrobatics, martial arts, and codified movements, often passed down physically from teacher to student. In many forms, including contemporary Western actor training, vocal work is also essential: actors learn to project their voices to the cheap seats, sustain long passages of text with breath support, or articulate clearly without amplification. Performance traditions also differ in how they use the face and body to convey meaning. In Kathakali, the face becomes a dynamic mask capable of expressing emotional states through intricate muscular articulation. Other forms such as Japanese Nōh, Italian *commedia dell'arte*, or ancient Greek tragedy rely on literal masks, which emphasize gestures and movement over facial expression.

In Western theatre influenced by realism, the actor's imagination becomes central to constructing a character's emotional inner life. Drawing on Stanislavski's system, actors may use personal emotional memory or what he called the "magic if," asking, "If I were in these circumstances, what would I do?" This representational style assumes that no independent "character" exists onstage; instead, the actor combines their own presence with the character's given circumstances—history, beliefs, class position, and cultural context. Performers identify what their character wants (their *super objective*) and pursue objectives in each scene through varying tactics. Contemporary Western acting is often transactional: each beat asks, "Who wins? Who loses? What is at stake?" Actors trained in this tradition use their bodies, voices, gestures, and imaginations to navigate these shifting dynamics in real time, working with scene partners to make the stakes legible for the audience.

Across these traditions, what emerges is not a universal recipe for acting but a vivid map of how different cultures imagine the work of performance itself. A Kathakali dancer's disciplined eye isolations, a Nōh actor's calibrated stillness, a *xíqǔ* performer's acrobatic precision, and a Stanislavskian actor's psychological inquiry each pursue distinct artistic goals shaped by their social worlds. These techniques encode ideas about spirituality, social order, emotion, and human behavior. Recognizing these differences helps us see acting not as a single craft with regional variations, but as a set of culturally rooted practices in which bodies, voices, and imaginations become instruments for expressing what matters to a community.

4.3: Case Study- Alys Dickerson Prepares Ophelia

Classical Texts and Contemporary Embodiment at American Players Theatre

Alys Dickerson's journey to becoming an Artistic Associate at the renowned classical repertory company American Players Theatre in Spring Green, Wisconsin, began long before she stepped into a rehearsal room. In this conversation, Dickerson reflects on the early sparks that drew her to the stage, her rigorous Meisner-based training at Northern Illinois University, and the discoveries that shaped her acclaimed performance as Ophelia. Speaking with candor and generosity, she traces the evolution of her craft—from high school auditions to professional Shakespeare, from ensemble work to casting and artistic leadership. As with the other artists featured in this book, Dickerson brings her personal history and context to bear on her work. In preparing to play Ophelia as a woman of color, she contended with and eventually rejected her own preconceived notions of the character as a shy, retiring, and explicitly white blond-haired blue-eyed waif. What emerges is a portrait of an artist's process where discipline, curiosity, and sense of purpose illuminate not only how actors train, prepare, and perform, but how they build a life in the theatre.

“Everything the Role Needs is Already in You”

A conversation with Alys Dickerson

Alys Dickerson: Hi, my name is Alys Dickerson. I am an Artistic Associate at American Players Theatre and a graduate of Northern Illinois University's 2016 MFA Acting class.

Gibson Alessandro Cima: Can you tell me how you got interested in acting? What were those early formative experiences in the theatre?

Dickerson: I was fifteen when I saw my first professional play. My father is a performer. He was a standup comedian and actor. It wasn't unfamiliar to me, but I was a freshman in high school and I went to see *Death of a Salesman* at Indianapolis Repertory Theatre. The rest of my class was falling asleep, and I was leaned in. I thought, “I want to do that.” I auditioned for my first Shakespeare play in high school. I memorized a monologue from a movie, and I thought I did terribly. The next day some of my friends asked me, “Where were you? You were on the, you were on the callback sheet.” So, I went to the first day of rehearsal and said, “Hey, I was called back. But I didn't go.” They said, “That's not how this works.” That was my first start into theatre.

I went to the University of Kentucky and got a BA in theatre. We were doing *Romeo and Juliet*. I remember listening to what the other teachers thought about Juliet, and I thought, “Oh, that must be what she is like.” I heard a teacher say, “Yeah, she's just a ninny.” I said that to my acting teacher and he was said, “Where did you get that from?” I responded, “Oh, I heard people talking about it.” He said, “Have you read the play?” I said, “No, I haven't read the play.” That happened. I started to fall in love with Shakespeare.

I came to NIU in 2013. I took a year off out of undergrad and thought hard about what I wanted to do. I knew I loved theatre. But I didn't yet know that I wanted to do it as a profession. I auditioned for a play called *The History of Cardenio*, one of Shakespeare's unfinished plays. Scholars from several universities had gotten together and finished the play and were producing it at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). I auditioned and I got in, and I thought, “I want to get better at this.” Then it went from, “I want to get better at this” to, “I want to be the best at this.” The same teacher who asked me, “What are you doing?” when it came to Juliet, was the teacher I went to, and I said, “I want to audition for grad school.” So we started preparing audition pieces and I was going to do URTA (University Resident Theatre Association), which is a huge call where a lot of different actors show up to audition for grad schools. I did my audition, and I didn't get chosen. There is a final open call, and if schools have stayed that next day, they can come and watch. I did my audition and then saw my name on the callback list for Northern Illinois University.

Then I came to NIU and I toured the school and I was still hesitant. I remember not really feeling it until I saw a grad student sitting in the hallway. I stepped out of my audition, and I was just breathing. He said, “Are you okay?” I said, “I think I'm okay. I don't know what I'm doing here, but I feel like I'm supposed to act and I hope this is the right program.” He said, “Do you want me to just talk to you a hundred percent?” I said, “Yes.” He kicked the realest stuff to me and said, “This is a program that uses Meisner. You'll learn about Stanislavski. You will have technique by the time you leave here.” I felt this splash of cold water on my

face.

Cima: For those who don't know who Meisner is or Stanislavski, can you explain a little bit about what the training is?

Dickerson: Stanislavski and Meisner are, it might be a stereotype, I don't know, the godfathers of theatre and what American theatre learned to become was based on the principles of these two men. There's more than just those two. But NIU is a Meisner-based program and what that means is you do a lot of repetition. You do a lot of moment-to-moment work. A lot of the work is training you to receive something in the moment and then respond authentically in the moment, while both you and your scene partner and your cast and ensemble know the given circumstances. Repetition work could look like the two of us sitting across from each other, and I would say, "You have brown suspenders on." I would notice that you have brown suspenders, and you would repeat that. I have brown suspenders.

Cima: I have brown suspenders.

Dickerson: Exactly. You would repeat that until something else started to happen. Whether you start to check out or whether you think, "I might be feeling a point of view about these suspenders." We had a wonderful teacher, Patricia Skarbinski, who is the reason to this day that I think I know what I'm doing on stage. Technique really came from her. She was one of Meisner's students' students. So, she was in the third tier. When we got here, we were told, "You'll be a part of this lineage because she is a student of Meisner himself." That was exciting to me. She made it healthy to approach the work with what you have today. We started with activity work. The goal was do an activity, any activity, something that you needed to get done. I think one of the first ones I did was try to string a guitar. There was another where I had to braid my sister's hair. I brought in a wig setup, and I had to braid it because she was getting ready for prom. Then the next segment was adding urgency, "Why does it need to be done now?" Then we would add repetition. We would say, "I'm feeling frustrated. I'm getting this done." You would perform the action with yourself, and then partner work was the next phase. One of the things she said that stuck with me most was, "Only say what you have to. Don't say the thing that you think you need to say. Say what you have to say." Some of us went on stage and had no lines and just let whatever was happening in the moment come through. To finish that process, we added a door, which was my favorite. You are in a scene with two people and now there's a door involved and the one inside the door has an activity they have to get done, and the one outside the door needs something from this person. They come in and you may or may not know they're coming. You may be expecting them, you might not. It broke down how a scene is supposed to work. Then you go out into professional theatre and think, "Oh, we are inside. Someone comes through the door and then something happens."

Cima: The grammar of the scene.

Dickerson: Yes, exactly. So, there were a lot of equations, different equations, but it felt as if, "There's still the same problem. What does this person coming in the door need?" Some of the best theatre I have seen in my life to date was in my grad class. Knowing what my classmates were going through, knowing what they were trying to work on, and then watching it happen in class, I would think, "Ah! This is the magic of theatre." You hear that phrase "The magic of theatre" and it's kind of corny, but also when you see it, you know what it is.

Cima: I've had that experience too, of being riveted by my students' work. Not where I think, "Oh, congratulations to me," but where I understand what it took them to get to that successful moment.

Dickerson: It brought us closer as a cohort. When you join a cohort, it's a group of people that you go through your grad program life with. We spent three years seeing each other's work and learning things about each other.

Cima: Plenty of people don't get MFAs before they become professional actors. Why was it important to you to get an MFA?

Dickerson: I needed to learn how to do this. I think I had great instincts, and I think I liked being in front of people. I liked making people feel some type of way. I loved all those things. But I didn't want to go through the world on a wing and a prayer and hope for the best. I wanted to learn. How does this industry work? How do I brand myself and what do I do if I am not meshing with a director? How do I translate a note? How do I work and collaborate as a team and an ensemble? Those are things I didn't know I desired but benefited from. You're learning from your educators, but you're also learning from the people in your cohort.

Grad school one hundred percent prepared me for professional theatre. There were some aspects of the profession where I thought, "Oh, I've never experienced this." But in the Business of Theatre class with Dr. Kay Martinovich, we did so many mock auditions I was ready to tear my hair out. Then when I graduated, I thought, "Oh no, this is the flow." In the profession you get told "no" a lot. You get rejected a lot. And you have to audition a lot. If you book it or get the callback, you have to remember, "Oh, I'm no longer auditioning, I'm showing them the thing I can do." Those are two different mentalities. That is something I think grad school sharpened me for. What happens once you get in the door and no one's testing you anymore? You are the only

one who is responsible for your work at that point. With an MFA, a terminal degree, you can teach. You can “go more places.” I’m heavily quotation-ing that because no one knows what your journey’s going to be as an actor. If I wanted to teach, if I wanted to run a theatre program, if I wanted to build a school, those are things that I would need a degree for.

Cima: Can you tell me how you landed the role of Ophelia at APT (American Players Theatre)? What was your process in building the role?

Dickerson: I auditioned for APT three times. It was 2019. I was working at Remy Bumpo as well as Organic Theatre (both Chicago-based theatre companies). I was performing two roles at the time. I was working my butt off in a day job. I still felt broke and I was depressed. I was in *The Father* at Remy Bumpo. It’s a beautiful play about Alzheimer’s. My friend in the play told me, “APT is doing generals [open call auditions]. We should go.” I thought, “I have no gas. No gas, metaphorically and no gas literally.” I remember being so exhausted. That’s such a part of the lifestyle. Really wanting to act and going for it means sacrificing some things. Anything you want, you have to sacrifice things. But I remember being super broke and super hungry and working all the time. I was driving us both up there [to APT]. I had one headshot left. I had given them all away. I spilled coffee on my headshot on the way up there. I am so tired. It’s winter. It’s cold. I get in there. I show them my stuff. I did a Portia monologue (from *Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare) and then I think I did a monologue from *King Hedley II* by August Wilson. Then I think I showed them a Joan of Arc monologue (from *Saint Joan* by George Bernard Shaw). I said, “I don’t have my headshot. I’m so sorry, I can email it to you.” The casting director, Carey Cannon said, “No, we’ll take it.” They take the coffee-stained headshot—my resume’s falling apart on the back of it.

I do my audition piece and I was ready to walk out. She says, “Okay, so what’s next for you?” I said, “I’m going to play Jo in *Little Women* (by Louisa May Alcott) at First Folio (a Chicago-based theatre company).” “What do you like to do?” I answered, “I’m a painter. I really love family. I really love faith. I go to church a lot. I love the beach.” If you’re lucky enough, they’ll ask you about yourself. She gives me a note and says, “Can we see them again?” I did my pieces again, and I remember the second time I did my piece—this is an NIU thing—I remember sometimes I would have to prepare and shake off the last performance and begin another one. I remember running towards the back of the wall and pushing myself off the wall and then starting my piece because I needed something to help. She must have loved it because she said, “Okay, stay here. I want to introduce you to somebody.” Carey Cannon brings in the artistic director Brenda Devita and they see my pieces again. She says, “Okay, we may have a role for you, we don’t know yet, but we’ll let you know.” I said, “Great. I’ve got to get back for this matinee.” We had a matinee that day and it is a two-hour drive. I was so tired. I remember learning how exhaustion helps me. It’s part of my process now. When I am too tired to fake it, when I’m too tired to—I don’t know, have any mask on, my work is amazing. I think. It feels free. It feels alive.

Then I booked the Scottish play (*Macbeth* by William Shakespeare) that first year. I was Lady McDuff. She has three or four pages, maybe. I remember feeling like I made an impression because my track was very small, but I took it very seriously. Advice I give to early career actors when they’re working at giant theatres: you might have to play the attendant and hold grapes or a fan or an umbrella. The third spear holder from the left trope is real. I tell my students, be the best spear holder from the left. Be the best nurse. Be the best maid. Be the best attendant. Make it your life’s work up there. Someone will notice. And they did.

The next year, the same director who directed *Mackers* (*Macbeth* by William Shakespeare) said he wanted me to play Ophelia, which I thought was wild when I first heard it, to be honest. I had never thought about playing that role. I had seen her in my head so many ways that I just didn’t think I fit that mold. That was a learning moment. It’s a big part. It’s an important piece of that play. I didn’t want to mess up. She has a scene we called the music scene. It is more commonly known as the mad scene. But the director said, “Let’s start calling it the music scene. I don’t want to call it the mad scene.” I’m a musician as well. I was a singer, well before I was an actress, and I got to compose my own music for Ophelia. I got to arrange it. Then the sound technician used it for the rest of the play. It was incredible. I remember Patricia Skarbinski told me in my third year of graduate school, “I think you are going to be someone who challenges folks. You’ll challenge the perception of a leading lady.” I appreciated hearing that because sometimes you’ll leave a training program and say to yourself, “I am going to be the funny friend, and I am going to be the dad. I’m going to be the ‘insert stereotype here.’” I remember challenging my own perception of what I thought Ophelia was supposed to be. I thought she was a skinny, like four-foot white, blonde woman, to be perfectly frank, and I am not that.

Cima: We forget that Ophelia was originally played by a 13-year-old boy.

Dickerson: Exactly. All these, Juliets, all these princesses, there were young men playing these roles. Who am I to think that I can’t do it? Unlike other processes since, Ophelia was a process where I had to do some unveiling for myself. I had to say, “Why did you think you couldn’t do this?” In the beginning, I remember making my voice really light and really airy. I did that because of my bias and because of what I thought she was supposed to sound like. There was one rehearsal where I got really frustrated and said the rest of my piece in a lower register. The director said, “That! That! Can that stay, please? You. Can you stay?” I had this lightbulb moment. I thought, “What am I doing?” This is post-MFA, post-BA. I felt as if this was my apprentice year, watching the other actors and learning, “Everything that the role needs is already existing in you.” I remember feeling ease after that.

When we talk about process, I remember booking Ophelia and reckoning with that. Reckoning with booking a lead is part of the process because if you're holding a plate of fruit, you think, "I know my job, I know everything I need to do." But if you're Hamlet, Ophelia, Lysander, Demetrius, the folks who keep the play going, there needs to be generation. There need to be choices. There needs to be leadership. Your prep should be on lock. And when I say prep, I mean everything your actor needs to do to prepare for the first read should be done. That looked like me reading the play over and over and over again. I knew I was playing the role six to eight months before. I had time to meditate on her. I had time to talk with the costume designer. I remember I had just done a big chop. I cut all my hair off. But I remember the quintessential thing of Ophelia's song scene, mad scene, music scene is she gives flowers out. Rosemary, a daisy.

Cima: And each of the flowers have different meanings.

Dickerson: Exactly. I didn't want to hand out flowers. I thought, "I want to hand out bits of my hair." The director said, "Tell me more about that." I responded, "I'm thinking about how important my hair journey has been for me." For a lot of black women—a lot of black people, honestly—hair is a whole other level of your identity, your confidence, your lineage, your family. That's just scratching the surface. I remember saying, "I want to have a journey with my hair." It's her final scene before she drowns herself. I said, "I think I want to pull my hair out." I don't know why. I think that image is madness. There's so much about, "Oh, I was pulling my hair out." We say that often, but I wanted to go there and do it. He loved that idea. I came to the table with ideas because I had read the play, thought, daydreamed about what the movie in my head would look like, then I brought that to the table on the first day.

Cima: You brought the idea of tearing out your hair into the rehearsal room?

Dickerson: I think it was before the first day. The director and I had a working relationship because of the Scottish play the year prior. He would call me and ask questions. I would share my Pinterest board. He would share images he'd seen. We agreed on some things before the first read: the music scene, my hair being the little gifts that I give away, and the song. I told him, "I'm going to try to work on how I want this song to sound. He put me in touch with the sound technician. I remember being in the shower, thinking about the lines. They're nonsensical sometimes. You read Ophelia, you think, "What is she talking about?" I have always been naturally a melody maker. I sang her first line, "How should I, your true love know?" The melody came into my mind in the shower. I thought, "Ooh! Yeah, I like that." It sounds a little Shakespearean, too. It has a Shakespeare timbre-y sound to it. Then the rest just came. Honestly, it was beautiful. Nothing's better than when you get to do the thing you know how to do, and you get to do it well and you get to share it with people.

APT taught me that showing up off book (entirely memorized) is great. The first step of my process is knowing the play, knowing the scene that came before and the scene that comes after. What starts the play? What ends the play? By the time we're all together reading it in a space, you can make some choices. There's a director friend I have at APT who says, "I like first reads because it means I can show the director how I think the character's supposed to go." I get to try something. The first step of my process is truly just reading the play. Then the second is knowing how to memorize. In a lot of talkbacks (post-show discussions) folks ask the actors, "How do you memorize all those lines?" I don't know why that question irks me beyond. I think, "That's what you wanna know after all this that we just showed you, you wanna know that?"

Cima: But if you take it seriously, there is a real question in that. Because plenty of people don't go around memorizing all these old stories, these speeches word for word.

Dickerson: Right. Punctuation for punctuation.

Cima: How do we go about memorizing all those lines? Or why do we do that?

Dickerson: Why do we do that? Shakespeare wrote these words. These words mean, "I love you." These words mean, "Where have you been? I'm your wife." These words are what the character is thinking. In graduate school, Heather Corwin taught a lab class called Sculpting the Text on how to memorize giant chunks of heightened text. We had a piece of text in front of us. The homework was, you're not allowed to memorize it. I think I did Portia's speech (from *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare): "You have ungently, Brutus, stole from my bed," is the first line. I would have to find gestures with my body for each word. You assign text to your body. It took all day. It does get tedious. But by the end, you're supposed to take all the movement out and the piece is in your brain because of muscle memory. This is a workshop I teach when I go to universities, because actors have to memorize pages worth of text and if that can be your thing, it's money in the bank. If you're the one who says, "I'll memorize that whole one-man show," you will get work.

I remember I was at NIU on a teaching residency with APT while I was memorizing Ophelia. I would go back to my hotel room. I would read the text. I would sculpt the text and I would try to associate movements to my body. When I got to the first read, it

wasn't, "Let me remember what I'm saying." It was, "This is who I'm talking to. This is our relationship to them. My father's right here when I say this line." Then it's time for given circumstances. Once you've got the words in your mouth, what's happening around you? How do you really feel about what's happening around you? Claudius and Gertrude, what's my relationship to them? They're on stage with me the whole time. Laertes, what is my relationship with him? We have a scene together. Hamlet, I only see him twice, but he's her world. I identify the relationship and then ask questions. A big part of the process is writing down at least fifty questions you have about your character or the world of the play. I write down all my curiosities and look at where I am in the play and who says my name. Who says any commentary about me? What is Ophelia doing in the mouth of Gertrude, in the mouth of Hamlet. What is Ophelia doing in her own world? What is the audience supposed to see from her arc? What do I as the actor want them to track with me? I move between questions and given circumstances.

Cima: You seemed to provide a very modern take on Ophelia. You appeared to be portraying the point of view of a contemporary woman in this situation and I wondered where that came from, if that's Alys there?

Dickerson: I am a strong individual, and I endow power to the spaces I go in and I know what my capacity is. The director called me out for trying to shrink it into this image of Ophelia. He said, "No, I wanted you. I meant that I wanted you." The word was "duty." This character has a duty to her family, to Hamlet, to the kingdom, to the succession plan. There is a job to be done. I think a big part of what kept me grounded in that contemporary energy was the relationship I had with Chike Johnson who played my father. We talked a lot about the little things we would change. Ophelia says, "While I was sewing in my chamber." This director asked, "Can we say reading?" Because sewing is a different image in 2022 than it was in 1599. He said, "I don't know that sewing fits this Ophelia that we've built." I agreed and we changed it to "While I was reading in my chamber."

We curated a little bit with the text, not too much. It was all the same words. But what if she is grounded and knows who she is? What if she does obey her father but doesn't want to? Another thing that made me think, "Oh, she's a victim," is that she's a victim in all these scholarly papers and in all these folks' renditions of her, she is this victim. I wasn't interested in that. I'd be faking it if I were to play it that way. Jamal James played Laertes (Ophelia's brother) and he's one of my best friends in the world. So, during the farewell between Laertes and Ophelia, I thought, "I want to talk to you like you're my best friend." Not just little sis having to listen to big brother, which is also there. But what if little sis is saying, "You don't know what you're talking about because you're going to go run your dalliances wherever you want to go and I have to stay here, because I have a duty." It highlighted how we treat men and women in this Shakespearean world. But also, that doesn't feel far from what I know. "It's okay, you men can run off and do whatever they want. I still have a job to do. I still have money to make. I still have this." I liked that the director let me lean into those moments. I like that, he let her say, "Is it just me? Am I going mad?" That's what it is. "Yeah. Yeah. You are going mad. You are."

Cima: Can you talk about your current position at APT and what you find yourself doing and how you've taken your love of performing and storytelling into a different realm?

Dickerson: Thank you for asking. It's good for me to say it out loud: I'm an Artistic Associate now at American Players Theatre, which is an artistic administrative position. A big part of that position is reading plays and casting bodies. I also run the apprentice program. I choose who gets in the apprentice program and what they get to learn and I am the point person for our understudy system. I get to eat, sleep, breathe, sweat, drink theatre. And it pays the bills. It's honestly a dream come true. Going from being on stage to working on the production side and helping produce these plays, cast these plays, choose these plays, I did not realize—and still probably don't, I've only been doing it for two years now— but I did not realize how much went into putting up a play from choosing the director, choosing the playwright, looking at the text and making sure that we can tell this story, asking does it play in 2020? Is this a classic? Then deciding the bodies we choose to audition for these characters, watching someone want it so desperately, but not, maybe they're not quite right, or there's a different answer that they're bringing, and then seeing someone come in so confident, they couldn't care less if they get the role and then you think, "Oh, there it is." That part.

APT is a classical rotating repertory theatre. What that means is we do classics. We do old plays that are "timeless" and we do them in between each other. There is a set on our stage in the morning that gets torn down and another one gets put up for the afternoon. Then another two plays go up tomorrow. Then another play goes up the next day. The same casts from play A are in play C, and they have to understudy play D. It is so much. There are days where I think, "Wow. Do people know what it takes to put up a play?" I didn't. I certainly didn't. I have been doing this most of my life and now I have a different reverence for the production side of things and the patience you need and how to set up a design team. How to listen and collaborate in a real way. Where on stage, it's the same five-to-twenty-four people. We have our words already, and when rehearsal's over, I go home. In my new position, we're auditioning 200 people for one role. We know some of these people. We have conversations with agents. We vet everybody that we hire. What that means is if I see on your resume that you worked for same theatre three times, I'm going to hit that theatre up and say, "Hey, do you know this actor? What do you think about this actor?" A lot of times that seals the deal and sometimes folks warn, "Do not hire this person."

I do miss acting. I miss acting incredibly, I came to APT to act. But I think I'm growing up and I'm in these rooms for a reason. I get to help folks who are older than me learn what's happening today. I get to learn from these young, hungry actors what it means to be after a character or a gig now, because that changes. That evolves over time. There are elements that are the same. It's a lot of learning and a lot of responsibility. The things I love about it are that it is what I said I wanted to do. I said, "If I can make theatre and live off of making theatre, I think I'll be a happy person." That's what's happening. I get to watch all these Shakespeare plays come to life. I think that by the time I'm back on stage, I'll have a giant cheat code because I've watched all these Shakespeare plays develop and these brilliant actors prep for these roles. I think there will be a day where I think, "Oh yeah, I've seen that. I'm ready. I can do it." It's like learning another language.

One part of the job that I'm still learning is networking. There are folks who—and I don't blame them for this—I was not this type of actor, but I know actors that want to network, want to be in your face, and want to say, "I'm doing this and you should come." Of course, I should come and, of course, I should see your work. But some days I want to go home and watch *The Office* and turn everything off. There are certain relationships that feel transactional because I am in a position now where I can help folks get jobs. I can make things happen, which I never considered as an actor ever. I didn't consider that. So that's a little sticking point. But I think it's good for me to feel, I think it's good for me to learn.

Cima: Having stepped onto the other side of the casting table, do you have any advice for young actors looking to start out?

Dickerson: Whatever you can do to eliminate the false truth that your worth is in how much you book, you will be a happy actor. Truly, you'll be a happy artist. There are a lot of actors that I see now, and I was one, I think. When I was younger, it was, "Oh my gosh, I didn't book this. I'm trash, I'm not good enough." You can take on a failure scarcity mentality doing that. And it's just not true. It's just not true. I've been in so many rooms now where I've seen the actor come in and there it is. There's the character. That does not mean the actor who comes in after or before them was not excellent. We did auditions for *King Lear* a couple years ago, and everyone who came in for Edmund was amazing. I thought, "There's no two alike. How do you do this?" The director had a vision, and the director said, "That's the one I want." Everyone else was amazing. Try not to associate your worth with how many yeses you get. It is about longevity, if you want to make this a career. It's about longevity. How do you see yourself running this marathon and not sprinting to the television screen? It took me fifteen years before I got a national commercial. I worked up to that point. It's mental health advice, honestly. There are so many other business tips and tricks and whatnot. But to keep yourself on the ground, decide what your worth is in something else, not in how many yeses you get.

And have a life. Have a life. Go and get your life. When I was younger coming up, people said, "I don't know if you can have a partner or a dog because you're going to be driving around to all these auditions." It is not true. Go fall in love. Go spend time with your family. Go learn how to make chocolate. Whatever you want to do with your life, still do it. We live in an age where you can do more than one thing. Everything you do will enrich whatever role comes next. Everything you do.

Discussion Questions 4.3.1

1. How did Dickerson's early experiences and initial misconceptions about auditioning shape her growth as a performer?
2. What role did formal training at NIU and the Meisner approach play in her professional development?
3. How did Dickerson navigate challenging a traditional perception of Ophelia, and what impact did that have on her performance?
4. In what ways does her current work in casting and artistic administration inform her acting—and vice versa?
5. How can actors maintain mental health and personal fulfillment while pursuing a long-term theatre career?

4.4: Learning Check and Chapter References

Questions for Review 4.4.1

1. How does Andrew Buckland's "no rope" demonstration illustrate the relationship between performance, imagination, and audience participation, and what does this suggest about why performance can feel so convincing even when we know it is not "real"?
2. Choose two performance traditions mentioned in the chapter (for example, Nōh, griot storytelling, Kathakali, Kabuki, Yoruba egúngún). How does each tradition define the purpose of performance, and how do those purposes shape the performer's training and techniques?
3. The chapter argues that ideas like "realism" or "believability" are culturally specific rather than universal. What examples from the chapter challenge contemporary Western assumptions about what "good acting" looks like, and how do those examples expand your understanding of performance?
4. Stanislavski and his students reshaped modern Western acting by emphasizing psychological realism and the actor's inner life. How does this tradition differ from performance systems that prioritize codified gestures, ritual functions, or virtuosity, and what does this comparison reveal about cultural values?
5. Across the many examples in this chapter from ancient Egyptian ritual to Mei Lanfang's xiqǔ virtuosity to contemporary digital self-performance, what throughlines do you see in the role performers play in their communities?

Chapter References

Brook, P. (1968) *The Empty Space*. Penguin Books.

Buckland, A. (2012) "Theatre or Extinction – Choose!: Andrew Buckland at TEDxRhodesU."

TEDx Talks. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8DWMCbAyEs&t=266s>

4.5: Unit Assignment

Monologue

In this assignment, you will write and perform a one-minute monologue inspired by your original three-page play. This exercise strengthens your understanding of character, conflict, and voice—all foundational tools for actors, playwrights, and directors. You will bring your monologue to class to be performed as a dramatic reading (no memorization required). You will, in turn, perform a reading of a classmate's monologue.

Part 1: Writing the Monologue (Paper Copy)

Step 1: Choose a Character

Select one character from your three-page morality play. This should be a character whose inner life, desire, or conflict feels compelling enough to support a sustained moment of spoken thought.

Step 2: Define the Situation

Before writing, answer these three essential acting questions:

1. Who is the character speaking to?
(Another character? The audience? Themselves? A higher power?)
2. What do they want in this moment?
(Love, justice, forgiveness, escape, clarity, revenge, reassurance, courage, etc.)
3. How do they try to get it?
(Through persuasion? Threat? Humor? Logic? Storytelling? Confession?)

Your monologue should reveal the character's objective, tactics, and stakes, just as actors identify them in rehearsal.

Step 3: Choose ONE Writing Prompt

Build the monologue using one of the following prompts. Select whichever most resonates with the character's experience:

1. "Picture This"
Choose a work of visual art that speaks to you. Let the monologue respond to or be inspired by that image.
Suggested approach: What story does the art evoke for the character?
2. "Do you think it's more important to follow your heart or your head?"
Write a monologue in which the character argues this question to someone important.
3. "Turning Back the Clocks"
What would the character do if they could return to a specific time? Where do they go, and why?
4. "What I never told my..."
Fill in the blank (mother, teacher, friend, enemy, partner, etc.). What truth has gone unspoken?
5. "Poetic Justice"
Choose any poem—silly or serious—and let the monologue respond to, disagree with, extend, or reinvent it.

Step 4: Formatting & Submission

Your monologue must be:

- ½ page, double-spaced (~1 minute spoken)
- Typed and printed
- Written in FIRST PERSON ("I")
- Brought to class as a physical paper copy

Part 2: Performing the Monologue

Performance Requirements

- You do not have to memorize the monologue.
- You will perform a dramatic reading of one of your fellow student's monologues, meaning you will hold the script.
- Focus on clearly communicating the character's desire, relationship, and emotional point of view.
- Consider vocal choices, pacing, and physical presence. Even a seated reading can reveal strong character work.

What I'm Looking For

- A clear sense of who the character is talking to
- A clear sense of what they want
- Specific, active choices in how they pursue that want
- An understanding of subtext (what they are trying NOT to say)
- Commitment to delivering the moment truthfully

5: THE DESIGNERS

In order to be a good lighting designer, you have to be a good theatre maker.

— Marcus Doshi

Every set should feel like a playground—full of possibilities for the story to unfold.

—Wilson Chin

The Roles of Designers

Of all the theatrical roles, the designer may first appear to be the most superfluous. We cannot imagine a play without a story to tell, without someone or a group of individuals directing that story, or without performers performing it. Yet, we somehow can imagine that story being told without costumes, an elaborate set, lighting or sound design. We forget that while theatre may exist without designers, productions are not possible without design. The actors' clothes are their costumes, the performance space is the set, whatever light illuminates the performance is the lighting design, and whatever sounds are available for the audience to hear form the sound design. The choice *not* to design these elements is *itself* a design decision. As lighting designer Joshua Langman writes, “design is *structural*,” not decorative (Langman 2022, xvii). Like playwrights, designers are both artists and craftspeople. Unlike painters or novelists, their artwork does not exist on its own; rather, it serves the story being told. Langman reminds us, “there is no such thing as design for design’s sake” (xvii). Just as playwrights create blueprints for action, theatrical designers create worlds in which action can take place. Set designer Wilson Chin, interviewed later in this chapter, refers to this world-building process as “creating an envelope” to hold the story.

How do designers create these containers for action? They follow an active design process. This process begins with understanding the story of the play. As lighting designer Marcus Doshi, also interviewed later in this chapter, reminds us, “If you understand the story, everything else takes care of itself.” Doshi explains his design philosophy and process as a “make, look, evaluate, and adapt” loop. He first *makes* something based on intuition, which is the accumulation of years of experience—his early interest in theatrical design, his graduate study, his knowledge of what “works” and what does not. Then, he *looks* at what he has made. In this step, he considers the spectators who will eventually view the production. He *evaluates* his design based on the question, “How do I want this moment to land with the audience?” Then, he *adapts* his design to better suit the moment before beginning the loop again. This process is specific to Doshi’s practice, but all theatrical designers follow a similar system of creation, though they may conceive of it differently. From the outside, theatrical design processes may seem obtuse, almost magical. Indeed, Wilson Chin tells us “So much of design is getting to that moment of eureka!”—the moment of insight where the design appears to the designer fully formed. But getting to that epiphany requires practices rooted in concrete aesthetic principles, in years of study and experience. In the case that inspiration doesn’t strike, designers rely on their artistic processes to pull them through. Doshi refers to this challenge as being creative on command.

The key to the apparent magic trick operating behind design is the collaborative nature of theatrical design process. Rather than serving as a finishing touch applied to a finished production like rouge, theatrical design is an integral part of the production process from the very beginning. Designers do not work in isolation. Their ideas emerge through sustained dialogue with directors, playwrights, performers, and fellow designers. Long before rehearsals with the actors begin, designers participate in production meetings, analyze the script, and engage in conceptual discussions that establish a shared vocabulary for the work. The director unifies but does not dictate design decisions. Through sketches, models, renderings, sound samples, and light plots, designers externalize ideas so they can be tested, challenged, and refined by the group. These exchanges ensure that design choices respond to collective questions: What story are we telling? What world does this play require? How should the audience experience this story? As rehearsals progress, designers adjust their work in response to new interpretations, practical constraints, and evolving performances. Theatrical design is a living practice integral to the production process—one that thrives on conversation, collaboration, and a commitment to serving the production.

5.1: Elements of Theatrical Design

5.2: Global Histories of Theatrical Design

5.3: Case Study- Marcus Doshi and Wilson Chin Design Antoinette Nwandu’s Pass Over

5.4: Learning Check and Chapter References

5.5: Unit Assignment

5.1: Elements of Theatrical Design

Before anything appears onstage, a designer's ideas must take form on paper, in pixels, or in a model. These representations allow designers to communicate their ideas to the director and their fellow designers, as well as to the technicians who will transform the design into physical reality. Like actors who execute the plans made by playwrights and directors, the technicians in costume, set, lighting, and prop shops realize designers' plans. Depending on the discipline, these plans take different forms. Lighting designers may produce a light plot showing where all of the lighting instruments will be hung in the theatre, cue list, or digital previsualization. Sound designers often generate cue sheets, sound maps, or audio samples. Costume designers create renderings of garments, and provide fabric swatches and costume plots showing the costumes each actor will wear throughout the play. Set designers typically draft ground plans (a bird's-eye view of the performance space), elevations, or three-dimensional scale models. While these materials vary widely, they all serve the same function: translating an abstract idea into a concrete proposal that can be discussed, refined, and ultimately built.

Theatrical designers develop these plans through practical and emotional (or mood) research. Practical research investigates the factual circumstances of a play's world, including its historical period, geographic location, architecture, technology, and social norms. Each design discipline filters this research through its own lens: set designers focus on spatial layout and materials, costume designers on how people dressed, lighting designers on sources and qualities of illumination, and sound designers on ambient noise and acoustic environments. For example, if a play is set in 1930s Chicago, a set designer might study photographs of the city from that era, storefronts, domestic interiors, and public spaces. A scene set in a high school gymnasium would prompt research into gymnasiums of that period. A costume designer might examine clothing styles. Researching a character who works at a grocery store would lead a costume designer to images of 1930s Chicago grocers. Practical research grounds the design in a believable reality and it ensures consistency across the production's visual and sonic world.

Emotional research focuses not on what the world looks like, but on how it feels. This type of research centers on the audience's experience and the emotional impact of the design. Designers frequently draw inspiration from other art forms—painting, photography, sculpture, film, and architecture—to identify colors, textures, compositions, or atmospheres that evoke the desired feelings. In his interview, lighting designer Marcus Doshi cites the photographs of Gregory Crewdson as a key influence on his designs for Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over*, noting their heightened realism and overall sense of unease. Costume designer Jeremy Floyd describes browsing art books or museum collections, such as those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre, or the Art Institute of Chicago, to locate images that capture an emotional tone rather than a literal reference (Floyd 2025). Designers may draw from hundreds of images and artworks, selectively incorporating elements from both practical and emotional research to craft a cohesive theatrical world.

In *The Art of Theatrical Design*, costume designer Kaoime Malloy identifies five core elements of design: point/line, shape/form, value, color, and texture (Malloy 2015). These elements serve as the building blocks of visual composition across all design disciplines. Malloy defines a point as “the smallest mark you can make on a surface” and a line as “a path traced by a moving point” (41). Though simple, points and lines can generate complex imagery, as seen in pointillist works like Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. In theatrical design, lines often define silhouettes, edges, and movement—whether in the contour of a costume, the architecture of a set, or the directionality of light. Shape refers to a two-dimensional, recognizable form, such as a triangle or square. Designers frequently begin by considering shape as an outline before determining how that shape will exist in space. Think of how an architect might begin a new building design by using circles, arches, and rectangles. Value describes “the presence or absence of light” (57), which helps establish contrast, focus, and depth, while color, “the element of light that is reflected back from an object to our eyes” (65), carries powerful emotional and symbolic associations and is influenced by lighting conditions. If you have ever watched a classic film noir like *The Maltese Falcon* or a sumptuous musical like *Oklahoma!*, you understand how value and color are tied to emotions. Texture refers to both the tactile and visual qualities of a surface—whether an object appears rough or smooth, soft or rigid, matte or glossy. Texture contributes to the audience's perception of realism and mood, even from a distance. By combining these elements with practical and emotional research, theatrical designers create worlds for actors' bodies and audiences' imaginations to inhabit.

5.2: Global Histories of Theatrical Design

One of the earliest surviving monuments to theatrical activity is also a monument to theatrical design. An ancient Egyptian carved stone stele dated around 1864 BCE reads in part: “I furnished his great bark [i.e., ship], the eternal everlasting one. I made for him the portable shrine that carries the beauty of the Foremost-of-the-Westerners [the king], of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, bronze, ssndm-wood [an exotic wood], and Lebanon cedar” (Lichtheim 1975, 124). The stele memorializes the activities of Ikhnofret, a treasurer for Senusret III, as he prepares for the annual festivities honoring the god Osiris. These rituals closely resemble the Abydos Passion Play, sometimes called *The Triumph of Horus*, a ceremonial reenactment of Horus’ victory over Seth. In overseeing the construction, transport, and display of these elements, Ikhnofret functioned as what we might now recognize as a set designer, prop designer, and stage manager combined. His work reminds us that theatrical design emerged globally alongside theatre and ritual as a means of shaping experience, guiding attention, and rendering ideas in material form.

Elsewhere in the ancient world, Greek tragedy, which began around the fifth century BCE, relied heavily on design. Performances took place in large purpose-built open-air amphitheaters designed to exploit natural acoustics. Actors wore masks that amplified facial expressions and allowed performers to play multiple roles. Costumes signaled gender, status, ethnicity, and character type, while painted scenery and stage machinery contributed to the visual spectacle, such as the *mēchanē* [machinery] used to lower gods onto the stage and the *eccyclema* [wheeled cart] used to display the bodies of those killed offstage.^[1] These ancient design systems transformed embodied mythic stories into a shared civic experience, demonstrating how architecture, costume, and technology collectively shape meaning. Roman architects understood the power of theatre to shape public opinion. They built Greek-style amphitheatres throughout their empire from London to Turkey. At the same time, in South Asia, the Sanskrit drama tradition known as *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*, originating in Kerala and dating back at least to the second century BCE, developed an equally complex design language laid out in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the ancient manual of Indian Sanskrit drama. Performances took place in specially constructed temple theatres called *Kuṭṭampalam*. Elaborate costumes, facial makeup using mineral pigments and rice paper, symbolic headpieces, and oil lamp lighting supported a performance system based on highly codified gestures and tightly controlled facial expressions intended to convey complex emotional states to an audience of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* connoisseurs.

Design was equally important for global performance during the Middle Ages. European trade guilds designed mobile stages called pageant wagons to stage biblical stories. These wagons, complete with trapdoors, smoke, fire effects, and mechanical devices, moved through towns and cities, transforming public space into performance space. Costumes and props helped audiences identify biblical figures, while pyrotechnics and special effects heightened emotional impact. Design made sacred narratives legible and compelling for masses of largely illiterate people, many of whom encountered these stories primarily through performance. In fourteenth-century Japan, Nōh theatre relied on a radically different but equally essential design system. Nōh stages are based on Shinto shrines: raised wooden platforms with a painted pine tree backdrop and a bridgeway (*hashigakari*) that connects the world of spirits to the world of humans. Performers wear intricately layered silk costumes and carved masks. Lighting remains even and unchanging, reinforcing the form’s meditative pacing. Here, design carries spiritual meaning and accentuates the virtuosic and deliberate gestures of the *Shite* (lead actor).

Though theatrical design was integral to global performance in the ancient and medieval periods, its practitioners were largely anonymous. During the Renaissance and Baroque periods in Europe, that anonymity began to disappear as courts, city-states, and religious institutions used theatrical spectacle to project political and cultural power. Princes, dukes, popes, and emperors competed to outdo one another through festivals, court masques, operas, and civic celebrations that demanded increasingly elaborate visual effects. Renaissance theatrical design became a profession closely aligned with architecture, mathematics, and perspective drawing. Italian architects Sebastiano Serlio (1475–1554) and Andrea Palladio (1508–1580) codified principles of scenic design and applied classical architectural principles to construct theatres where forced perspective created the illusion of vast interior spaces. In the seventeenth century, advances in stage machinery expanded the possibilities for spectacle. Italian designer and engineer Nicola Sabbatini’s (1574–1654) *Pratica di fabricar scene e machine ne’ teatri* (1638) documented methods for rapid scene changes, wave machines, thunder effects, and lighting tricks.

The Baroque period intensified these developments. Giacomo Torelli (1608–1678) perfected a mechanized stage technology that allowed multiple scenic flats to change simultaneously, enabling seamless transformations that became standard in opera houses across Europe and symbolized the effortless power of absolutist rule. In England, architect Inigo Jones (1573–1652) designed sets, costumes, and machinery for court masques performed for King James I and Charles I. The era also produced dynasties of theatrical designers, notably the Bibiena family, whose *scena per angolo* broke away from single-point perspective to create diagonally oriented architectural environments suited to Baroque opera and imperial spectacle. By the end of the Baroque period, theatrical designers became recognizable cultural figures whose work circulated through engravings, treatises, and international commissions. Design became a primary actor in elaborate power plays. Theatrical design cemented itself as a

distinct artistic practice, combining visual art, engineering, architecture, and political symbolism. This shift laid the foundation for modern scenography and established the designer as a central collaborator in the creation of theatrical worlds.

The modern era of theatrical design, beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, marked a decisive shift away from illusionistic spectacle toward design as an expressive, conceptual, and interpretive force. Designers increasingly rejected painted perspectival scenery and decorative excess in favor of abstraction, symbolism, and the integration of space, light, sound, and movement. This shift was tied to broader social and political changes, including industrialization, urbanization, anti-colonial movements, and new philosophies of art and perception. In Europe, Adolphe Appia (1862–1928) and Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966) fundamentally reimagined the role of design. For Appia, scenery and light were active partners with the performer's body. Craig championed abstraction, movable screens, and stylized lighting over representational scenery. Across the twentieth century, theatrical design evolved in dialogue with modernism, expressionism, constructivism, and later postmodern and experimental performance practices. Designers such as Josef Svoboda (1920–2002) in Czechoslovakia integrated film projection, kinetic scenery, and advanced lighting technologies to create immersive, multimedia environments. In the United States, Jo Mielziner (1901–1976) developed psychologically expressive realism, while later artists such as Chinese-born American designer Ming Cho Lee (1930–2020) emphasized minimalism, profoundly shaping generations of designers through both practice and pedagogy.

Around the world, designers and performance-makers blended established forms with modern aesthetics to respond to colonial legacies, national identity, and local performance traditions. In Asia, artists working in forms such as Chinese opera, Japanese theatre, and Indian performance adapted centuries-old costume, makeup, and spatial conventions to contemporary stages and technologies. In Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, designers have transformed found spaces with limited material resources and continued long traditions of performance rooted in ritual, community, and resistance. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, contemporary theatrical design has become increasingly collaborative, interdisciplinary, and global. Designers regularly cross boundaries between theatre, dance, opera, installation art, film, and digital media. Projections, interactive technologies, soundscapes, and environmentally responsive lighting have expanded the designer's toolkit, while sustainability and ethical material practices have become central concerns. Today, theatrical designers are recognized not only as visual artists and technicians, but as dramaturgs, storytellers, and collaborators whose work shapes how audiences experience time, space, and meaning. From ancient ritual objects to digitally mediated performance environments, global histories of theatrical design reveal a continuous human impulse: to make ideas visible, to organize collective attention, and to transform space into a site of shared imagination.

[i] The *mēchanē* was a crane-like stage device used in ancient Greek theatre to lower actors portraying gods onto the stage. The practice inspired the phrase *deus ex machina* ("god from the machine"), now used to describe an unlikely or artificial plot resolution.

5.3: Case Study- Marcus Doshi and Wilson Chin Design Antoinette Nwandu's Pass Over

On August 4, 2021, the lights on Broadway flickered back to life after an unprecedented eighteen-month shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The first new production to open was *Pass Over* by Antoinette Nwandu—a symbolic and urgent choice. Nwandu's play reimagines Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* through the intersecting lenses of the biblical Exodus story, the legacy of American slavery, and contemporary Black life in the United States. Two young Black men, Moses and Kitch, linger on a street corner, dreaming of escape while navigating the constant threat of state violence embodied by the racist Ossifer and the unsettling, otherworldly presence of Mister.

Pass Over did not emerge fully formed on Broadway. Instead, it evolved across multiple productions and cultural moments, beginning with its 2017 premiere in Steppenwolf Theatre Company's intimate Upstairs Theatre in Chicago. That initial production, directed by Danya Taymor and designed by a close-knit team including lighting designer Marcus Doshi, set designer Wilson Chin, sound designer Justin Ellington, and costume designer Sarafina Bush, established the play's stark visual language and allegorical terrain. The production was later remounted on Steppenwolf's mainstage and filmed by Spike Lee for Amazon Films, before transferring to Lincoln Center Theater's LCT3 Off-Broadway in 2018, and ultimately to Broadway in 2021. At each stage, the script, staging, and design were reconsidered in response to shifting spaces, audiences, and a rapidly changing national conversation about race, policing, and racial justice.

This case study focuses on the long-term collaboration between Doshi and Chin, tracing how lighting and scenic design worked together to visualize urgency, danger, and presence across these evolving iterations. Through these two in-depth conversations, both designers reflect on the iterative nature of theatrical design, the challenges and opportunities of working with a living playwright, and the ways instinct, expertise, and collaboration shape aesthetic choices. Their reflections illuminate design as an adaptive, responsive practice embedded in social context, rehearsal process, and the shared labor of meaning making on stage.

“Make, Look, Evaluate, Adapt”

A Conversation with Marcus Doshi

Marcus Doshi: My name is Marcus Doshi. I'm currently a professor of theatre at Northwestern University, and I'm also a lighting designer for theatre and opera. I was born in Connecticut, but ended up in Indiana for elementary and middle and high school. I went to a small college called Wabash College in Central Indiana. I went there because they had a hell of a pre-med program and I wanted to be a neurosurgeon, but I discovered theatre there. The virtue of that school is that it was a small liberal arts school. We had the opportunity to study and practice all parts of theatre. I discovered I was not a very good actor and had a propensity for design. By the time I graduated from Wabash, I'd worked any backstage position and any design position you could do on a show, save costumes. I spent a semester in New York City interning at the Vineyard Theatre Company in Union Square, and then I went to the Yale School of Drama for graduate school. I finished there in 2000. I moved to New York because that's what you did at the time and I worked all over the world for twelve years before I moved to Chicago to start the position at Northwestern. I still carry on a very active design practice all over the world.

Gibson Alessandro Cima: What led to your interest in lighting design, specifically?

Doshi: I started fiddling around with set design. I'm a union set designer and I design sets occasionally. I realized it was hard for me to conceive of a space without thinking about how it was lit. I think that was informed by some early studies of Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig and the new stagecraft revolution. As I put those ideas into practice, I realized that the great thing about lighting in theatre is that it's an active design process. It's plastic. The form allows you to be dynamic and engaged with the performers up until the moment that the show crystallizes. It was a way for me to be much more dynamically engaged with the production as it unfolds. I talk about the “make, look, evaluate, and adapt” loop. You look. You make an idea. You look at it as naively as possible. You evaluate whether or not it's doing what you want it to do, and then you adapt it, and you cycle through this as you go. That's only possible with a plastic form. I've always been a very visual person.

Cima: Can you start to walk me through your process of designing *Pass Over*? How did you get involved with the project and what was the design process?

Doshi: It started out as a project at Steppenwolf Theatre. I came on board and the team really gelled very quickly. Wilson [Chin], I knew from graduate school. We put the piece together and it was being rewritten all through rehearsals. It had a pretty successful run. Then Amazon Films wanted to film it and hired Spike Lee to direct the filming of the production. We had this one wacko crazy weekend where we remounted it at Steppenwolf, but this time on their main stage. The first production had been done in their now-closed upstairs theatre. We redid it very quickly for Amazon Films. The disadvantage of the film is you don't get to see the entire mise en scene of the plagues. It's all done in closeups, which is, in my view, a drag because we made the picture in a certain way. But that's how it works for film. Then it got picked up. We transferred it to LCT 3, Lincoln Center 3, which is considered an off-Broadway theatre in New York. We remounted it. There were some script changes that happened but was essentially the same production. I don't remember the exact year, but it was pre-pandemic. Then, finally, we did it on Broadway, and it was the first new production back on Broadway after the pandemic. That version had some more script changes, specifically having to do with the ending. That was a much more optimistic ending than previous versions.

Cima: How did you approach the design process?

Doshi: There's something that happens when you become an expert in any field, the decision-making process becomes less cognitive and more instinctual. You have more experiences to draw on. You can make decisions much quicker. I remember Wilson [Chin] had the idea of the set pretty early on. He's a really good designer. When I looked at it, I thought, "Oh, yeah, this all makes sense, right?" We had the discussions you always have as a team, asking what exactly is the story? With Antoinette [Nwandu]'s play, there's many different layers of dramaturgy happening. It's ancient Egypt. It's a plantation. It's contemporary inner city. We tried to figure out the version of four-dimensional chess that's happening between the characters the whole time. If you understand what that story is, everything else takes care of itself in a weird way, especially when you're operating on an instinctual level. Once we got an idea of how the story was told, what it meant when Ossifer showed up, what it meant when Mister showed up, what the time-of-day span meant, then we tried to wrap our heads around the various endings.

We came up with an arc for the piece. Then it's my job to ask, what does this mean with regards to lighting? I am a minimalist. I love to flirt with very subtle changes in plays. There's an artist called Gregory Crewdson. He's a photographer whose work is a huge influence on mine. I was really getting into him at the time. If you look up his photographs, you'll see that many of them are staged, and some of them have interesting and peculiar color relationships. I was thinking about streetlights. The streetlight was a central image of the play. I always think of the semiotics [sign system] of a practical [non-theatrical] on stage. What is it supposed to be? What is it representing? It's the icon of streetlight, but it's also supposed to be where all the light in the scene comes from. There's many kinds of streetlights. These days, there's LED streetlights, which you see a lot of, and they're ugly as sin. But there's the old mercury vapor and sodium vapor lights. The mercury vapor ones are the cool white ones, and the sodium ones are the yellow ones. I thought, wouldn't it be interesting if the world of Moses and Kitch and Ossifer were lit with cool mercury vapor? Then when Mister comes in, it warms up in an imperceptible way and becomes more of that yellow ick color. I wove that idea into the design. It was all very subtle in terms of minutes-long cues changing the color.

It felt important to me that there was aggressivity and abstraction to the light. Instead of just having the light come from the streetlight, there were dominant sidelights. That's where the meat and potatoes of the lighting design came from. Part of that choice of side lighting was because of how aggressive it is. Part of it is that those angles are really good at popping bodies away from a background. If you think about a typical dance lighting plot where the light is coming in from the side. That's exactly what it was. It allowed me to create a real darkness with the background. But also it can be traumatic and evoke, scariness, right? Because of the way the figures presented with a big shadow down the front of the body. It's like what the boogeyman might look like. I wanted the street corner where they lived to be dangerous but I also wanted to push these two guys off the stage and right into the audience's laps in terms of intensity.

The whole play, except for the sunrise and the ending in the Broadway version, basically takes place at night. But I've always been one of those people who thinks brighter is better. It doesn't matter. It's all abstract. You don't have to make it dark. It doesn't have to literally be dark to figuratively be dark.

Cima: Much of the play is about race. I noticed that when Mister is on stage, he's even whiter than white. He's washed out. Almost like a ghost.

Doshi: That's the virtue of the warm color temperature. I am one of those designers who picks the right feeling of light for what the story is. Then within that feeling, I do subtle tweaking to see what version of that will be the best for skin tones. For example, the cool white light that dominated the corner with Moses and Kitch, there's a lot of different ways to make that light. Not to get too technical, but there's different gels we can use. There's one called Lee 201, and there's one called Lee 501. Lee 501 is just slightly warmer than Lee 201. That's the one I chose for the show because I didn't want it to green out Moses and Kitch, but I needed it to still work for Ossifer. When Mister was there, it was actually just clear white light.

Cima: There was a functional streetlight?

Doshi: We took a functional streetlight, we ripped it apart, and we put color-changing LED tape in it so I could fine tune the color for the cool white and the warm white. LED tape has red, green, blue, a warm white, and a cool white. The warm white is the same color temperature as an incandescent light bulb. The cool white is the same color temperature as daylight. But the cool white also looks like the mercury vapor streetlamp. When I wanted it to be warm, I was able to put a little bit of green in it. Then during the plagues, it was red.

Cima: You said the ending changed for the Broadway run and became more optimistic. Can you talk about those changes?

Doshi: In the Broadway version, I don't want to speak for my colleagues, and I certainly don't want to speak for Antoinette [Nwandu], because my understanding of what she did might be different than her motivation for it. But we were all looking for some optimism in the world. It was post-pandemic. It was post-George Floyd. The world was reeling and we didn't want to go out on a bummer, or I didn't want to go to a bummer, anyway. The idea was that at the end of the play, after the plagues, at the moment of self-actualization for the guys, that suddenly the world was revealed to them. The idea is that it was like precolonial Manhattan, the island of Manahatta. During the plagues there was a scrim [sheer curtain] upstage, which was just this black backdrop. It's just these guys in this black surround. Then, during the plagues, there were lightning flashes where you just barely caught glimpses of foliage up there. At the end, we revealed a giant landscape of foliage and sky and a sun. Then they were able to exit off through the background.

Cima: So, Mister doesn't reappear to—

Doshi: He reappears, but it's not the same reappearance. It was a beautiful, very different ending. Whether or not it was as powerful as previous endings is an open question. It's curious because that makes two different plays. That was a big technical challenge to pull that off in just the right way. For those of you who've read my book, there's a really interesting conversation that we all had as a team and it was fiery to come up with what we wanted that last image to actually be.

Cima: Can you talk about having a living playwright in the room and what that does to your process?

Doshi: It depends on the playwright. Some living playwrights in the room will just huddle down and take notes and then talk to the director later. Some playwrights in the room have strong opinions about everything. Antoinette [Nwandu] certainly has strong opinions about everything. I'm a big fan of the hierarchy of theatre rehearsal practice. I always like it when playwrights talk to the director and then the director interprets that and talks to all the designers. But there were times when we were figuring stuff out and everybody would huddle because we're all friends. That's the virtue of a social, collaborative process. We would go out to dinner and ask, "Hey, what if we did this? Or wouldn't it be cool if we did this?" I remember when we were doing one of the Steppenwolf iterations, I had the whole team over and made collard greens and pinto beans for everybody.

Cima: Theatre is a collaborative art form.

Doshi: We can't do it alone. It's a very social art form. When the playwright's there, it's nice too because sometimes you think, "Hey, these words and this idea aren't meshing." As a lighting designer, I'm always fond of saying that the lighting designer and the director are the only two people who are responsible for 100% of stage time. Even if it's a blackout, it's on us. Sometimes when I work with playwrights that I've worked with often, I have dramaturgical conversations that aren't necessarily about design but help me solve something that I'm trying to solve design-wise. It happens in opera too, where I say, "Hey, we don't have enough time for this transition. Can you write another 10 bars of music?" Nobody knows how the sausage is made in the theatre. They don't come out humming the lighting design. If they do, we've all made a mistake.

Cima: There's that old lighting design joke about how you're never mentioned in the reviews.

Doshi: If you are, it's because they hate you.

Cima: You talked about how you now work intuitively. I wanted to come back to that. How did you learn to build that intuitive structure? For young designers, how do they learn to trust their intuition?

Doshi: There's a lot of research done these days on theories of expertise. The most common and popularly quoted one is that it takes 10,000 hours of deliberate practice before you become an expert. I don't know if that number is exactly true. I'd have to go back and do a lot of math to see how many hours I've been in tech, but it's pretty close. I always tell my students the great thing about doing theatre in a university is that you can fail. You're practicing how to make theatre. I often joke that we go to play practice, we don't go to rehearsal. I love the idea of how rehearsal is a place of experimentation. I used to hate the word

play when it related to work. Now I love the word play because it is the idea of letting the imagination loose. When you're a young designer, you are constantly trying to figure out what you are doing. What light am I turning on? What is it supposed to look like? How do I make this scary? Or how do I do this transition? Because you've never done it before. In my early career, I can think about the terror of being in tech and not exactly knowing what I was gonna do next.

But if you do it enough, you start to build a vocabulary of what works and what doesn't work in terms of storytelling on the stage. If you're in a thrust theatre [with audience on three sides], people are going to be staged on the diagonal. So it's probably a good idea to have a light coming out of the vom [the space in between groups of audience members where actors enter] and one going into the vom. It sounds like Legos. But in a way, it is. If you put those [lights] there, you're probably going to need them. You start to build these ideas of what might be necessary in the storytelling. Those are nuts and bolts things. After you do enough shows in the thrust, you don't even think about it anymore. You're know, "I need this [vom light], and this [vom light]. Because it's a thrust. It doesn't matter what the play is." That's an architectural response to the space.

How you use the lights and how you integrate those ideas into the overall ebb and flow of the lighting design becomes your style. You can probably look at several of my plays or operas and understand style choices I make as a designer. There's fifteen different ways to light people, but one of them is the one I might choose. Once you understand what your style is, once you understand that the necessary components of how to light a play, how to make a light plot, how to put lights in the air, where to put them to effectively translate ideas, what ones you're going to want in the air, no matter what show it is—for example, it doesn't matter what show it is, I'm always putting a cross light system [a method of lighting performers from opposing side angles, rather than from straight-on] because I know what cross light will do. I know exactly how I can use it. It's like "ol' reliable" in that regard. That doesn't make it formulaic. I know that for me to make the show look like I want it to, it's probably going to need cross light. Then if there's a finite amount of time I can spend working on a show in advance. I know, of course, there's a finite amount of time I can spend working on a show in the theatre because it says I have to start being creative at noon and stop at five and start up at seven, end at midnight. That's my job. The more you practice, the less time you have to spend thinking about what the light plot is. In fact, these days, I mostly make my assistants make the light plots. I give them a list of ideas and say, "You have a good idea of how I think a good cross light system should work. Go make a plot and show it to me." I want to spend my time using that plot in the theatre, crafting light for the show. I now can intuit responses to what's going on stage without having to think too much about them.

I tell my students I'm a classic mid-century modernist in the studio where every idea is there for a reason, and then I am a totally feral postmodernist in the theatre. Whatever my gut is telling me is a good idea. Of course, I have an idea like this scene happens at night or day, and I can get a little bit more wild depending on what the piece is. In the end, I'm making decisions that seem to make sense to me for some reason. Usually, "I've done a show like this before. I've wanted to evoke an idea like this before and this worked. I'm going to turn it on and see what happens." Then I "make look, evaluate, and adapt." Once we get through the whole show, I go back and look at the whole thing, and I think, "I see the idea I'm going for here." I'm going to spend the rest of the time carving it out and making sure it articulates itself the way it wants to, whilst also growing with the way the production is growing on stage through the rehearsal process. If there's a long preview process, the lighting design for the first preview might be radically different than the lighting design for opening night. I'll just keep working until they tell me I can't anymore.

Cima: They do say, "Okay. You're done."

Doshi: Yes. It's a little bit different with opera because we don't have previews, and generally you don't have rehearsal after the final orchestra dress. I want the show to be buttoned up by the end of the penultimate orchestra dress. Then, I can watch the orchestra dress for mistakes. The next time you see it is opening night. I loathe making changes between the last rehearsal and opening night. Sometimes you have to. The opera process is radically different from the theatre process, at least for lighting designers.

Cima: You have written a book about aesthetics.

Doshi: I have.

Cima: I wondered if you could talk about the importance of visual storytelling and how aesthetics play into your work.

Doshi: The thing I was trying to get at with that book is that in order to be a good lighting designer, you have to be a good theatre maker. In order to be a good theatre maker, you need to know how to collaborate. In order to be a good theatre maker, you need to be an artist. In order to be an artist, you have to have an idea of what makes art and to give yourself permission to say there's such things as good art and there's such things as bad art, which is always a heretical idea to introduce to young people. If you don't think there's a difference between good art and bad art, why do we do previews? You do a preview so you can make your bad art good art, or your good art better art. What was important to me in the context of the book was to set forth my own idea

of what I think an artist is and what I think an artwork is. I think the artist is the maker and there's an art object, but the artwork itself happens in the dialogue between whatever the art object is and spectator, which is why I devote a lot of time to theories of spectatorship. The wonderful thing about the theatre, and why I'm drawn to the theatre more than any other art form, is the dialogue between the artwork and the spectator is live and active and dynamic. Whereas I can look at a sculpture all day long, but that's a one-way story.

I wanted to foreground the idea of thinking in terms of being an artist, thinking in terms of also being a spectator, because an artist also has to be a spectator to their own work for it to work well. I wanted to say, "Here's my point of view on design, using some case studies," but then I realized I needed to provide a clear understanding of what I think modernism is and what I think postmodernism is so that I could explain to the readers how all that high theory actually matters when you're trying to figure out, "Am I going to make this red or blue, or am I going to turn that light on or that light on?" Previous to my book, there was very little literature out there that connected the heady, artistic, dramaturgical idea to [the practical need to] put a 360 Degree Source Four over there. There was nothing. I wanted to talk about how you can make those choices in the book. This idea of spectatorship becomes more foregrounded as I continue my career. I'll be having a discussion with a collaborator and we'll start talking about whether or not a moment's landing. I'll ask, "Are we primary, secondary, or tertiary witnesses to what's going on?" Then somebody asks, "What do you mean?" I respond, "Are we witnessing the event, or are we witnessing somebody else witnessing the event, or are we hearing about somebody else witnessing the event? How do we want that to land with the audience?" If we can identify how we want the spectator to take this thing in, then all the answers to our questions will be made.

Discussion Questions:

1. How did Marcus Doshi's early theatre experiences at Wabash College shape his approach to design?
2. In what ways does the "make, look, evaluate, adapt" loop reflect a growth-oriented design process?
3. How did collaboration with Wilson Chin and the creative team influence the lighting design for *Pass Over*?
4. How does Doshi balance technical precision with instinct in his design choices?
5. What role does spectatorship play in Doshi's overall design philosophy?

Designing Worlds, Inviting Play

A Conversation with Wilson Chin

Wilson Chin: My name is Wilson Chin. I am a set designer. I'm from California. I went to college there, UC Berkeley. I studied architecture, but I always loved theatre. I loved it as an audience member. It wasn't something I thought I could do professionally. It wasn't until after college that I went to Williamstown Theatre Festival for two summers as an intern just for fun, I discovered you can do theatre professionally. I met other professionals and realized this was something I loved doing and I wanted to keep on doing. I went to grad school. I went to Yale School of Drama. I moved to New York because it's the epicenter of American theatre. I've been there now for over 20 years.

Gibson Alessandro Cima: What made you want to go to the Williamstown Festival to begin with?

Chin: It had an incredible reputation. It produced ten plays in ten weeks. Literally every week they would open a new play. In one summer, being able to do back-to-back shows, fitting basically a whole year's worth of theatre in three months, that was really appealing to me.

Cima: Were you doing design work then?

Chin: It was an internship. I was mainly painting, which I had no experience in. So I learned so much from my colleagues, from designers. Most of what I know now I learned in those two summers at Williamstown.

Cima: What drew you to set design specifically?

Chin: I think it's about creating a world in which a story can take place. In high school, I discovered [Steven] Sondheim and his musicals. His musicals had incredible original designs. Boris Aronson designed them. His designs for *Company*, *Follies*, *Sweeney Todd*, later with *Into the Woods*, these are like iconic set designs that inspired me. I don't think I design like that myself; but I think the idea of creating an envelope for a story to be told in, that is what drew me into it.

Cima: What was the takeaway from your graduate study?

Chin: At Yale, the main professor was Ming Cho Lee, who was an iconic designer. I wanted to go to Yale to study under him. He

had trained a lot of designers who were also my favorite designers. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of the people he had taught. He was a real advocate for making sure that there were generations to come of designers who had a very thoughtful process.

Cima: Tell me about those years in New York as you were starting to build your career.

Chin: I first moved to New York and I spent many years assisting other designers, which is a great thing because it's a real job. You get paid well if you have the skills, and because I studied architecture, I had very good model-making skills. I had good hand drafting skills. I was useful for productions. I assisted some of my favorite designers. I wrote my favorite designers and asked, "Can I work in your studio?" I ended up working for about three years with a designer named Santo Loquasto, who is one of my favorite designers. I learned so much from him. All the while I was designing my own shows on the side. Over three years, I had to make the decision to step away from assisting and become my own designer, which is what I've been doing since then.

Cima: What did you particularly like about his designs?

Chin: His designs had a rawness to them and a materiality to them. You look at his sets and they don't look artificial or fake. You feel the texture. His scenery has life to it, has character to it. You look at one of his sets and you understand. It becomes like another character in the play.

Cima: Is there a design that I would be familiar with?

Chin: Santo did sets and costumes. As a costume designer, he designed the original production of *Ragtime*. He did the sets and costumes for *Fosse, the Musical, Moving Out*. Recently, on Broadway right now, he did the set for *Gypsy*. He did a lot of dance. He did opera, plays, musicals. I loved his versatility. That's what I aspire to do as well.

Cima: Were there aspects of his work that you incorporated into your own?

Chin: Every time I design a show, I think about materials. I think about how the characters inhabit the space and the interaction between the two. I think about how the space is getting used, providing opportunities for usage. You want the set to be full of possibilities. That's what I feel like his work was like. That's what I aspire my work to be like as well.

Cima: How do you go about creating possibilities for the actors and the director?

Chin: As a set designer, you have to create spaces that are flexible enough that you feel like anything can happen. You don't want to get locked in. You want the play to be able to breathe. It's not just about open space. It's about making sure that the pieces that you provide have multi-use, can move around in different ways. It's a feeling of a playground. Set design is also about creating layers of depth: foreground and background so the actors have something to interact with when they're downstage or mid-stage, or upstage, so it almost has a cinematic quality. When you watch a movie, it's not just always actors in the foreground and things in the background. It's an interplay between the world and the actors.

Cima: How did you get involved with *Pass Over*, and what was your design process?

Chin: *Pass Over* came to me when it was about to have a production at Steppenwolf. There's not a lot of stage directions, and the stage directions that are in the script are very amorphous and dreamlike. When you approach the play, you can go in many directions. The play is allegorical. It's not about specific people, but the characters represent other things. It's representational. It's metaphorical. I wanted to create a world that can contain all of that. You have to imagine. Put yourself into it. Put your own feelings about who these characters are, and what their situation is [into the design], because it's all ambiguous. It's also tied in with *Waiting for Godot*, the classic [Samuel] Beckett play. I thought a lot, what are the parallels? How to mirror that? Instead of a tree, I put in a big streetlamp. I knew it wanted to be desolate. It's just a slab of concrete that's like a sidewalk, like a street corner. The original script said the play works on three different levels: the biblical exodus story, a southern plantation slave-time story, a story in the here and the now. Containing all three of those worlds was a fun challenge. The original production was a slab of concrete that was surrounded by desert sand. We also, at one point, had cotton plants back there, like they were in a plantation.

We've done the play now in four different iterations, and each time we get closer and closer to the essence of the play. The original production had all of this stuff in it. With each subsequent production, we stripped away a little bit. We did it at Steppenwolf and then we redid it at Steppenwolf with Spike Lee filming it. Then, we took it to New York off-Broadway at Lincoln Center. Then, we took it to Broadway. By the time we got to Broadway, there was no more sand, no more cotton plants. It was just a desolate slab of concrete. At the end, when they pass over to the Promised Land, we did a big transformation where a Garden of Eden, a utopia emerges around them. I feel if we were to do the play again now, we would find a different way. I think the playwright and the director were never interested in repeating themselves. It was always a constantly evolving dialogue with the story. Because it

was so allegorical, the story could shift and morph and transform over time in space.

Cima: I've seen the film but that has a very different ending. I hear that the ending was much more hopeful on Broadway.

Chin: Yeah. Because the play existed in a certain time each time we performed it. And so there were some moments in our past where we were more hopeful than other times, and the play production reflected that at each time.

Cima: Were you part of those discussions?

Chin: It was always an ongoing dialogue. The playwright and the director are such open people. It was a very communal discussion between actors, designers. It was a long-term collaboration that went on for a few years. It was great.

Cima: You talked about the streetlight instead of the bare tree.

Chin: The original stage directions didn't mention a streetlamp. I think they do now. The stage direction at the beginning, it just said a street corner. I didn't really give a street corner because a street corner implies a corner of a building, and I didn't put any buildings in because I just wanted it to be desolate. It was evoking a street corner without actually being one.

Cima: Then, of course, Marcus [Doshi] took that up, asking, "What is the quality of light this streetlamp is going to give off, this phosphor light?" Can you talk a little bit more about the artistic collaborations that you went through with the other designers with Marcus [Doshi] and Justin [Ellington] and Sarafina [Bush]?

Chin: With lighting design, we knew how desolate it was, we knew when you walk into the space, you didn't want it to feel like you were seeing traditional theatre. We didn't have any masking on the sides. It was just the exposed walls of the theatre. So you walk in and you feel like you're in an empty theatre with just the slab in the middle. [Marcus Doshi's] lights are totally exposed. It's a lot of side light, because that's the best way to isolate and to sculpt people. It was almost like dance lighting, which is not a lot of front light, a lot of sidelight, a lot of backlight. You feel like they're almost floating in space. In every iteration we've had, we've maintained the "no masking" feel to it. You feel like you're walking into a raw space. With costumes, because the world is a dark void, the actors need to pop. We discovered quickly that wearing black clothes, they disappear into the background. Giving them pops of color makes them stand out in the world.

Sound and lights work together hand-in-hand because there's so many moments of pops and shifts. It's almost like a horror movie. There's a certain amount of tension that needs to be maintained throughout. That's all about lights and sound working hand-in-hand to create an environment that shows these two guys are constantly in terror for their lives, but they're getting through it. Because what they're afraid of, you don't really ever see. So, it's just about the sound and the lights creating that shift.

Cima: When the white guy [Mister] comes on stage, there's a surreal kind of feeling of being on a picnic in the 1950s, this green landscape at the same time as being on this street corner. And I wondered, how you built those moments of rupture, where, suddenly they're being affected by the policeman [Ossifer] coming or the white guy.

Chin: Sound and lights do a lot of that. What I had to figure out is how this guy enters the world. It's a floating slab—you can't really tell how they get on or off it. It feels like they should be trapped on it, because like in *Waiting for Godot*, there's nowhere to go. This guy appears magically. With each iteration, we figured out different ways for him to pop up. Literally there were times when he was just underneath the platform and would pop up a little bit. Then there were times when we built a black ramp you couldn't see because the whole surround was black, and he would just walk on. With lights, it was like magic, almost like a magic trick, diversion of the eye. You do something in one corner, and then the other guy sets himself up so the audience doesn't notice. Then with a shift of light, you notice. There actually was a magic special effect specialist who worked on these transitions with us. The picnic is magical as well. In Chicago, and I think in the movie version, he had an enormous basket, and all the food was in it. When we moved to New York, we gave him a much smaller basket. We had a little trap door underneath the deck that the food popped up in. There needs to be like an otherworldly quality to this guy. We don't know who he is, but he's not right. He's not of this world, almost. It's about how he enters and exits the space and that basket.

Cima: I love that idea of the old magic tricks that still work, misdirection and all of those old safe escapes.

Chin: *Waiting for Godot* is a vaudevillian act. That was what *Waiting for Godot* was based on. We kept some of that tradition of oldie timey, vaudeville magic in with us. Bill Irwin, who's a clown and also a Beckett specialist—was a consultant on our production of *Pass Over* when we moved to Broadway.

Cima: How has participating in that process shaped your work moving forward?

Chin: The director is a woman named Danya Taymor, whose process is like none other I've seen. She's very process-oriented and works deeply with actors to create this real mood in the room. They begin every rehearsal with half an hour of stretching and exercises. There's a lot of trust in the room. So much of theatre is about getting the job done. It feels like a construction site. She creates a meditative, almost like spiritual room. the work becomes super intense, super hyper-focused. You can go so far if there's a real trust and a real giving yourself into the work. She directed *The Outsiders* on Broadway, which was her first musical. I saw it and I was so proud of her because I saw it and I saw all of the things she brings to a production in that production. There was an intensity, there was a quietness at times I've never seen any other director do except for Danya [Taymor]. That relationship is something that I took out of *Pass Over*.

Cima: Is that meditative approach something you're trying to integrate into your practice now?

Chin: My process is very calm. In my studio, it's not a lot of hubbub. It's not a lot of yelling. I think I'm fairly quiet in a way. I think. I'm not like running around going crazy. I try to slow things down.

Cima: Can you walk me through a typical process?

Chin: You get the script. You read the script. For me, reading that script for the first time is a very big deal because, like an audience member, you only get one time to take in the story. Reading the script is my first time to take in the story. First impressions are important. What I'm thinking as I'm reading the play is important because that's also the journey an audience member takes. Clocking how I'm feeling as I'm reading the play is important. I read the play and I usually put the play aside and just live with that story for a little bit. While I'm living with it, I think about what the world of it could be, the mood of it. I feel as a designer, I don't go directly into the specific needs of the play. I think first about what is the overall vibe of this world. What is the mood? Then, once that starts taking shape, I start thinking about detail. I do research, particularly if the play is set in a period or a place that's not familiar to me, but even if it is familiar. It's all about getting closer to the core of what I think this world is. Research, dreaming, talking about the play with the director, it all brings you closer and at a certain point it snaps together where you understand what it needs to be. Once that happens, everything else is just about making it happen. So much of design is getting to that moment of "Eureka!" Then it's just filling in the blanks.

Cima: Is there a reason why you work primarily in the theatre rather than film or television?

Chin: I love the communal aspect of theatre. We're all in the same room together, actors, audience, the theatre space, every night they come together and relive the story over and over again, the repetition of it. What you're watching is something that is hyper-rehearsed, locked in. Of course, it's going to be a little different every night, but the cues are the same. The transitions are the same. I love the coordination of all the elements together: text, acting, design, staging. It's crazy that theatre works. It takes dozens of people to make a single moment happen. And it happens every night. Hopefully nothing ever goes wrong. Being in the same room with this thing that happens the same every night is inspiring.

Discussion Questions:

1. How did Wilson Chin's background in architecture shape his approach to set design?
2. What does Chin mean by making a set "full of possibilities" for directors and actors, and how might this affect performance?
3. How did the design of *Pass Over* evolve over its multiple productions, and what does this suggest about the role of iteration in design?
4. In what ways can set design contribute to metaphor and allegory in a play?
5. How does Chin's collaborative process with other designers reflect the interconnected nature of theatrical production?

5.4: Learning Check and Chapter References

Questions for Review 5.4.1

1. The chapter argues that theatre cannot exist without design, even when no one is formally labeled a “designer.” Do you agree with this claim? Can you think of a performance you’ve seen where design choices were minimal but still impactful? What made them work?
2. Marcus Doshi describes design as both intuitive and structured through his “make, look, evaluate, adapt” loop. How does this process challenge common ideas about artistic inspiration as sudden or purely emotional? Where do you see room for intuition within a disciplined process?
3. Designers work closely with directors, playwrights, and performers, yet the director “unifies but does not dictate” design decisions. How should power and authority be shared in a collaborative production? What tensions might arise, and how can they be productive?
4. The chapter distinguishes between practical research (what a world looks like) and emotional research (how it feels). Which do you think has a greater impact on an audience’s experience? Can you imagine a production where these two types of research might be in conflict?
5. Looking at the global histories of theatrical design discussed in the chapter, how do design systems reflect the cultural, spiritual, or political values of their societies? How might contemporary designers responsibly draw inspiration from these traditions today?

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5.5: Unit Assignment

Overview

Having developed a director's concept for your peer's three-page play, you will produce a design portfolio for one of the following production aspects of that play: lighting, costumes, sound, or set. Conduct emotional research (find images that evoke the feeling that you would like to convey through your design) and practical research (find images from the place and time during which your play is set). Collect that research (at least three emotional images and three practical images). Then, provide renderings of your design. If you choose costume design, draw what the costumes would look like on the characters. If you choose lighting, draw the positions of the lights for certain scenes. If you choose sound, provide links where I can hear aspects of your sound design. If you choose set design, draw a ground plan, or a drawing of the set from above. Finally, provide a one paragraph explanation of your choices.

Your portfolio must contain the following components:

1. Research — Emotional & Practical

- Emotional Research: Collect at least three images (photographs, paintings, digital art, color swatches, etc.) that evoke the *emotional tone, atmosphere, or mood* you want your chosen design element to convey.
- Practical/Contextual Research: Collect at least three images representing the *time, place, culture, or environment* of the play setting—appropriate to where/when your play is set.
- For each image, include a caption (or short annotation) explaining what it contributes to your design thinking (e.g., “This image’s soft, golden light suggests intimacy and nostalgia—useful for Scene 2’s memory flashback”).

2. Design Renderings (Sketches, Drawings, or Other Media)

Depending on your chosen design element:

- Costume design: Provide drawings/sketches (hand-drawn or digital) of each main character’s costume—ideally from multiple views (front, side, back) and/or different states (e.g., everyday wear vs. dramatic moment).
- Lighting design: Provide a diagram (plan or perspective view) showing lighting positions (e.g., overhead, sidelights, footlights) for key scenes (at least 2–3 scenes). Indicate light types, angles, color/gels, intensity—as needed.
- Sound design: Provide a sound “mood board”—e.g., links (or embedded audio) to at least 2–4 sound clips or musical pieces that reflect ambient noise, thematic motifs, or transitions. Optionally provide a short script or cue-sheet showing when sounds will enter/exit.
- Set design: Provide a ground plan and/or a perspective drawing (or both)—enough to show where walls, doors/windows, furniture, entrances/exits, levels (if any), and scenic elements exist. If helpful, include approximate dimensions or scale.

3. Design rationale—one paragraph explanation

Write a concise paragraph explaining why you made the design choices you did. For example: how your emotional research informed the look/feel; how your practical research grounds the design historically or contextually; how design choices support character, theme, mood; how design supports dramatic action, transitions, or pacing.

6: Conclusion- The Audience

The good news of the coming AI revolution is that I think there's going to be a little bit of spring back to wanting to go see something live so that you know that's a real human saying real human words to another human written by a human about what it's like to be human for other humans.

—Stephen Colbert, comedian

Theatre as a Shared Human Practice

Human beings are endlessly interested in what other humans are doing. Across cultures and histories, we have gathered to witness one another around fires, in village squares, temples, courtyards, purpose-built theatres, and repurposed spaces. We are hardwired for spectatorship and performance. We use our bodies to tell stories of love and loss, warning and wonder, grief and joy. Through performance we attempt to explain to ourselves and each other what being alive in this moment means—individually and collectively. Theatre is a uniquely human practice. It is part of our inheritance. Long before ancient Greeks carved the Theatre of Dionysus into the side of the Acropolis or ancient Egyptians chiseled the script for *The Triumph of Horus* into the walls of the Temple of Edfu, communities across the globe enacted stories through ritual, dance, song, and imitation. From the Sanskrit dramas attributed to Kālidāsa to the court spectacles of the Ming dynasty, from the sacred performances of the Yoruba peoples to the virtuosic dances of Japanese Nōh, theatre helps us remember, question, celebrate, and resist. Though its forms differ, the impulse to gather and witness remains constant.

Over the course of this book, you have encountered four key theatrical roles: the playwright, the director, the performer, and the designer. These roles have existed in various forms throughout the global histories of theatre, reaching as far back as human memory serves and perhaps even farther. In some traditions, one individual embodied all of them, becoming storyteller, director, performer, and designer; in others, they were distributed across a community. In the contemporary moment, these roles have become more professionalized and their boundaries more defined. Contracts, unions, professional training programs, and institutional theatres have clarified responsibilities and established standards of practice. In doing so, modern theatre distinguishes itself from ritual and communal performance even as it continues to draw on these traditions for inspiration. These four roles do not function in isolation. An ecosystem of hundreds and sometimes thousands of collaborators support them: stage managers who maintain order and continuity; producers who secure resources; dramaturgs who contextualize meaning; technicians who build and program light and sound; artisans who cut, weld, stitch, sculpt, and paint; administrators and marketers who connect the work to its public. Their labor is often invisible, but essential. All this human effort is intended to serve the most important theatrical role: the audience, you.

You may not intend to pursue a career in the theatre or entertainment industry, but it is my fervent hope that you will become a lifelong theatregoer. Yes, theatre is expensive. Yes, it is difficult to make plans to leave one's house, find parking, find somewhere to eat dinner, and make it to a 7:30 PM curtain. Yes, not every production will have the quality of a Broadway hit. But often, the audience's effort in being present is rewarded tenfold by the generosity of the performers, designers, directors, playwrights, technicians, and others who've given their time and energy to create a transformational experience. Theatre scholar Jill Dolan has termed this feeling a *utopian performative*: "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly about the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense" (Dolan 2005, 5). You may have experienced this feeling yourself as you sat in the audience of one of the live performances you viewed during this course, or perhaps you've felt similarly watching a sibling's high school play or a Broadway musical. Theatre is a collective emotional experience that can make us feel profoundly connected to people we've never seen before and may never see again. That moment, however fleeting, is worth the effort.

What Theatre-Making Teaches Us

In *The Adaptable Degree: How Education in Theatre Supports the Economy of the Future*, scholar and theatre artist Melanie Dreyer-Lude argues, "Not only is theatre study not 'optional' in today's job market, but the skills theatre students acquire have become some of those most highly sought by employers. We now live in a world in which abilities like interpersonal communication, adaptive problem-solving, and creativity are at a premium" (Dreyer-Lude 2025, 2). Her research overwhelmingly demonstrates that theatre students are using their degrees to gain employment in a wide range of careers and that employers

are searching for the skills that theatre is uniquely positioned to teach, such as storytelling, creativity, collaboration, project management, leadership, and so on. Far from serving as an ornament to a more practical education, theatre studies may be essential to competing in a contemporary workforce where supposedly stable career paths have been upended by the development of ever new technologies of mechanization and artificial intelligence.

As students who have had the opportunity to study theatre over the course of this textbook, you may start to understand why. As playwright Mary Kathryn Nagle reminds us, theatre invites us to reach out to those we don't agree with, creating dialogue. As director Mikael Burke argues, theatre pushes us to search for the "why" of the thing we are trying to accomplish. As actor Alys Dickerson underscores, theatre instructs us we are enough and we have everything we need to create magic within ourselves. As lighting designer Marcus Doshi advocates, theatre forces us to trust our instincts and rely on our experience. As set designer Wilson Chin offers, theatre helps us imagine new worlds and possibilities. By inhabiting each of these theatrical roles in the classroom, we learn how to apply the skills of the theatre to everyday problems and concerns, term papers, exams, deadlines at work, personal and professional relationships.

Decolonizing the Introduction to Theatre Syllabus

When I set out to decolonize my Introduction to Theatre syllabus in 2022, I naively believed it was a matter of checking off a list:

1. Undo the singular white male genius myth that defined my own theatre history education.
2. Avoid the pitfalls of the West-and-the-rest syllabus that foregrounds Western theatre at the expense of telling a global story of theatre's multiple histories.
3. Shun the progressive narrative of theatre history.

Instead, I opted for a story that focused on the mimetic impulse innate to all humans by providing a diverse set of contemporary case studies that followed the artistic process, embracing equitable classroom management and grading practices, and focusing on theatre as a live, embodied, collaborative storytelling practice.

As I complete this textbook, I understand more fully the reasons why I hadn't read a textbook that told the story I wanted about theatre as a shared human practice. I am keenly aware of the numerous ways in which, in seeking to tell a different story, this effort has fallen short and told the same story in perhaps a slightly different way. More work needs to be done to tell the full global story of theatre. I hope that this textbook can serve as a template and an open, online, and freely available resource to support that great future ongoing work of decolonization and indigenization.

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Discussion Questions, Learning Checks, Assignments, and Syllabus

Introduction

Discussion Questions for *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* case study

1. What does *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* reveal about the relationship between identity and state documentation? How does the play complicate the idea of who a person is?
2. How did the specific political and social conditions of apartheid shape the way the play was created, performed, and received?
3. In what ways does the act of assuming another identity become both a form of survival and a loss in the play?
4. How does this case study help us think about theatre as more than entertainment? Can you think of a contemporary parallel where performance intersects with protest?
5. How might the play's impact change when performed in South Africa, in London, or on Broadway? Does the meaning of the play change when it is performed today? How does context shape interpretation?

Learning Check for the Introduction

1. What does the introduction identify as the three defining qualities of theatre, and why are these qualities essential to how theatre functions as an art form?
2. What is *mimesis*? How does this human impulse help explain the origins and ongoing relevance of theatre?
3. Why do contemporary scholars caution against the assumption that theatre “naturally” developed out of ritual? What harmful ideas or historical assumptions does this view risk reinforcing?
4. How does the introduction describe theatre as a global cultural practice? Provide one example of a non-Western performance tradition and explain how it expands or challenges Eurocentric definitions of theatre.
5. According to the introduction, what allows theatre to remain meaningful and relevant in the contemporary world despite competition from digital media and new technologies?

Chapter 1: The Playwright

Discussion Questions for Mary Kathryn Nagle Interview

1. Nagle draws parallels between her legal work and playwriting. How does her approach to storytelling bridge these two professions?
2. In what ways did personal history and family stories shape the creation of *Sovereignty*?
3. How does Nagle's process of historical research inform her fictionalized storytelling, and what does this suggest about the role of accuracy in theatre?
4. Nagle talks about accessibility and reaching audiences beyond those already aligned with progressive causes. How might theatre practitioners work toward this goal?
5. Why do so many non-Native women feel that Sarah's story is their own? What does that say about the theatre's ability to tell stories that feel simultaneously universal and particular?

Learning Check for Chapter 1:

1. A playwright creates a “blueprint for action.” How does this idea expand or complicate your previous understanding of authorship, and how might your thinking continue to evolve as you encounter more collaborative or collective forms of theatre-making?
2. Several structures are presented. Which dramatic structure—Freytag's Pyramid, jo-ha-kyū, rasa theory, feminist and postmodern forms—feels most familiar or unfamiliar to you, and what might you gain by experimenting with a structure that challenges your habits of storytelling?
3. The chapter reframes global playwriting history as marked by loss, colonization, and anonymity. How does this perspective shift your understanding of whose stories “count,” and how might you continue to question inherited theatrical canons in your own studies?

4. Conflict and change are central to story. Where do you see these forces at work in your own life or community, and how might developing your awareness of conflict and transformation strengthen your analytical or creative skills?
5. In the case study of *Sovereignty*, theatre serves as a political and legal intervention, not solely entertainment. How does this challenge your assumptions about what theatre can do, and what steps could you take to more deeply explore theatre's potential as a tool for cultural memory, critique, or change?

Chapter 1 Assignment: Three-Page Play

Overview:

For this project, you will write an original three-page play that uses the structure and conventions of a morality play—a medieval dramatic form that uses allegorical characters to explore ethical dilemmas. Your task is to bring this form into a contemporary world by combining its recognizable features with themes, conflicts, and social issues that matter to you and your peers right now.

Part 1: Concept and Source Inspiration

Choose a story, myth, parable, or fairytale that resonates with a real issue in your life or community. You may use well-known material (e.g., The Tortoise and the Hare, Little Red Riding Hood, Pandora's Box) or something from your own cultural background.

As you brainstorm, identify:

- A contemporary issue you wish to highlight (e.g., burnout, social media addiction, climate anxiety, impostor syndrome, housing insecurity, student debt).
- A moral or lesson your play will explore.
- Why does this story matter to you, and why should it matter to your audience at this moment?

Part 2: Adapting the Morality Play Format

Your play should clearly signal its connection to morality play traditions. To keep the form legible, consider including the following classic elements:

- Allegorical characters whose names reflect their functions or traits (e.g., Ambition, Doomscrolling, Prudence, Self-Doubt, Joy, Procrastination)
- A central protagonist (Everyperson or a contemporary "Everyman" figure—e.g., Student, Applicant, Roommate, Neighbor)
- A moral journey in which the protagonist encounters forces that pull them toward clarity or confusion, virtue or vice
- A crisis or turning point where the protagonist must choose a path
- A takeaway—not a heavy-handed "moral," but a clear thematic resolution or open-ended question that leaves the audience thinking

You do *not* need to imitate archaic language or religious themes. Instead, adapt the structure in ways that feel relevant, surprising, and true to your voice.

Chapter 2: The Director

Discussion Questions for Mikael Burke Interview

1. How did Burke's early experiences in music and church theatre influence his later work as a director?
2. What role did failure (such as not landing internships) play in shaping Burke's career path?
3. How does Burke's "small planet" approach to reading plays change the way a director might interpret a script?
4. Why does Burke emphasize the "why" as the most important question in directing?
5. What are the advantages and challenges of working with a playwright who is also acting in their own play?

Learning Check for Chapter 2

1. How does the chapter define the director's central responsibility in theatre-making, and how does this role balance both artistic interpretation and leadership within a collaborative production process?
2. What is a director's concept, and how do dramatic action and a central unifying image work together to guide actors, designers, and other collaborators in shaping a production?
3. Describe one example from the chapter (such as *The Magnolia Ballet* or *Romeo and Juliet*) that illustrates how a strong directorial concept can influence staging, design, and audience interpretation. What made the concept effective?

4. How have directing practices varied across global and historical traditions? Choose one example from the chapter (the sūtradhāra, the daoyan, the iemoto, the choregos, Stanislavski, Brecht, etc.) and explain how that figure fulfilled functions similar to—or different from—those of a contemporary director.
5. In what ways does the chapter demonstrate that directing is not a fixed or universal role? How do culture, politics, technology, or collaborative structures shape what a director does and how a director creates meaning on stage?

Chapter 2 Assignment: Director's Concept

Now that you have written your three-page morality-play adaptation, your next step is to think like a director. For this assignment, you will write a one-page, double-spaced Director's Concept that articulates your artistic vision for staging your fellow student's play. Your concept should communicate how you understand the story and how you would bring it to life onstage for a contemporary audience.

What Your Director's Concept Must Include

1. Dramatic Action (What happens in the play?)

Provide a clear and concise statement of the essential action of the play. This is not a summary of every plot point, but a distilled explanation of what drives the story forward.

- What motivates the characters?
- What central conflict or moral struggle structures the action?
- What changes between the beginning and the end?

2. Central Unifying Image (How do you imagine the play onstage?)

Identify a visual, metaphorical, or conceptual image that captures the heart of your production. This image should unify your staging choices and give the audience a way to understand the play's world.

- Is your unifying image tied to a symbol from the original parable, myth, or story?
- Does it come from your contemporary setting (a school hallway, a smartphone screen, a corporate office, a protest line, etc.)?
- How does this image illuminate the play's moral argument?

3. Directorial Approach (How will you direct the play?)

Explain your approach to performance, staging, and actor-audience relationships. Consider:

- Will the style be presentational, poetic, realistic, satirical, or allegorical?
- How will you work with actors to convey moral choice and transformation?
- Will you incorporate conventions of medieval morality plays (asides, allegorical characters, direct address, episodic structure)? How will they be adapted to a modern context?

4. Background and Relevance (Why this play for this audience at this time?)

Connect the moral of the original story and the contemporary issue it's addressing.

- What is the moral or ethical lesson the adaptation explores?
- What modern problem, challenge, or question does the play respond to?
- Why is this story meaningful right now, and to whom is it speaking?

Your job here is to show that your production is purposeful, not accidental.

5. Technical Elements (What should the audience see, hear, and feel?)

Describe how you imagine the design elements supporting your concept.

You do not need to draw sketches; instead, use vivid language to show the aesthetic world. Consider:

Set

- What environment does the play occur in?

- Is it literal (a bedroom, a street corner) or abstract (a fractured moral landscape)?

Lighting

- What emotions, transitions, or moral turning points should lighting emphasize?
- Bright, stark, shadowed, warm, neon—why?

Costumes

- How do costumes reflect each character's symbolic or allegorical identity?
- How do they place the play in the contemporary setting?

Sound / Music

- Would sound help establish tone or highlight moral tension?

The goal is to demonstrate how your staging choices reinforce the story's themes and the morality-play structure.

Chapter 3: The Performer

Discussion Questions for Alys Dickerson Interview:

1. How did Dickerson's early experiences and initial misconceptions about auditioning shape her growth as a performer?
2. What role did formal training at NIU and the Meisner approach play in her professional development?
3. How did Dickerson navigate challenging a traditional perception of Ophelia, and what impact did that have on her performance?
4. In what ways does her current work in casting and artistic administration inform her acting—and vice versa?
5. How can actors maintain mental health and personal fulfillment while pursuing a long-term theatre career?

Learning Check for Chapter 3

1. How does Andrew Buckland's "no rope" demonstration illustrate the relationship between performance, imagination, and audience participation, and what does this suggest about why performance can feel so convincing even when we know it is not "real"?
2. Choose two performance traditions mentioned in the chapter (for example, Nōh, griot storytelling, Kathakali, Kabuki, Yoruba egúngún). How does each tradition define the purpose of performance, and how do those purposes shape the performer's training and techniques?
3. The chapter argues that ideas like "realism" or "believability" are culturally specific rather than universal. What examples from the chapter challenge contemporary Western assumptions about what "good acting" looks like, and how do those examples expand your understanding of performance?
4. Stanislavski and his students reshaped modern Western acting by emphasizing psychological realism and the actor's inner life. How does this tradition differ from performance systems that prioritize codified gestures, ritual functions, or virtuosity, and what does this comparison reveal about cultural values?
5. Across the many examples in this chapter from ancient Egyptian ritual to Mei Lanfang's xiqǔ virtuosity to contemporary digital self-performance what throughlines do you see in the role performers play in their communities?

Chapter 3 Assignment: Monologue

In this assignment, you will write and perform a one-minute monologue inspired by your original three-page play. This exercise strengthens your understanding of character, conflict, and voice—all foundational tools for actors, playwrights, and directors. You will bring your monologue to class to be performed as a dramatic reading (no memorization required). You will, in turn, perform a reading of a classmate's monologue.

Part 1: Writing the Monologue (Paper Copy)

Step 1: Choose a Character

Select one character from your three-page morality play. This should be a character whose inner life, desire, or conflict feels compelling enough to support a sustained moment of spoken thought.

Step 2: Define the Situation

Before writing, answer these three essential acting questions:

1. Who is the character speaking to?
(Another character? The audience? Themselves? A higher power?)
2. What do they want in this moment?
(Love, justice, forgiveness, escape, clarity, revenge, reassurance, courage, etc.)
3. How do they try to get it?
(Through persuasion? Threat? Humor? Logic? Storytelling? Confession?)

Your monologue should reveal the character's objective, tactics, and stakes, just as actors identify them in rehearsal.

Step 3: Choose ONE Writing Prompt

Build the monologue using one of the following prompts. Select whichever most resonates with the character's experience:

1. "Picture This"
Choose a work of visual art that speaks to you. Let the monologue respond to or be inspired by that image.
Suggested approach: What story does the art evoke for the character?
2. "Do you think it's more important to follow your heart or your head?"
Write a monologue in which the character argues this question to someone important.
3. "Turning Back the Clocks"
What would the character do if they could return to a specific time? Where do they go, and why?
4. "What I never told my..."
Fill in the blank (mother, teacher, friend, enemy, partner, etc.). What truth has gone unspoken?
5. "Poetic Justice"
Choose any poem—silly or serious—and let the monologue respond to, disagree with, extend, or reinvent it.

Step 4: Formatting & Submission

Your monologue must be:

- ½ page, double-spaced (~1 minute spoken)
- Typed and printed
- Written in FIRST PERSON ("I")
- Brought to class as a physical paper copy

Part 2: Performing the Monologue

Performance Requirements

- You do not have to memorize the monologue.
- You will perform a dramatic reading of one of your fellow student's monologues, meaning you will hold the script.
- Focus on clearly communicating the character's desire, relationship, and emotional point of view.
- Consider vocal choices, pacing, and physical presence. Even a seated reading can reveal strong character work.

What I'm Looking For

- A clear sense of who the character is talking to
- A clear sense of what they want
- Specific, active choices in how they pursue that want
- An understanding of subtext (what they are trying NOT to say)

Commitment to delivering the moment truthfully

Chapter 4: The Designers

Discussion Questions for Marcus Doshi Interview

1. How did Marcus Doshi's early theatre experiences at Wabash College shape his approach to design?
2. In what ways does the "make, look, evaluate, adapt" loop reflect a growth-oriented design process?
3. How did collaboration with Wilson Chin and the creative team influence the lighting design for *Pass Over*?
4. How does Doshi balance technical precision with instinct in his design choices?
5. What role does spectatorship play in Doshi's overall design philosophy?

Discussion Questions for Wilson Chin Interview:

1. How did Wilson Chin's background in architecture shape his approach to set design?
2. What does Chin mean by making a set "full of possibilities" for directors and actors, and how might this affect performance?
3. How did the design of *Pass Over* evolve over its multiple productions, and what does this suggest about the role of iteration in design?
4. In what ways can set design contribute to metaphor and allegory in a play?
5. How does Chin's collaborative process with other designers reflect the interconnected nature of theatrical production?

Learning Check for Chapter 4

1. The chapter argues that theatre cannot exist without design, even when no one is formally labeled a "designer." Do you agree with this claim? Can you think of a performance you've seen where design choices were minimal but still impactful? What made them work?
2. Marcus Doshi describes design as both intuitive and structured through his "make, look, evaluate, adapt" loop. How does this process challenge common ideas about artistic inspiration as sudden or purely emotional? Where do you see room for intuition within a disciplined process?
3. Designers work closely with directors, playwrights, and performers, yet the director "unifies but does not dictate" design decisions. How should power and authority be shared in a collaborative production? What tensions might arise, and how can they be productive?
4. The chapter distinguishes between practical research (what a world looks like) and emotional research (how it feels). Which do you think has a greater impact on an audience's experience? Can you imagine a production where these two types of research might be in conflict?
5. Looking at the global histories of theatrical design discussed in the chapter, how do design systems reflect the cultural, spiritual, or political values of their societies? How might contemporary designers responsibly draw inspiration from these traditions today?

Chapter 4 Assignment: Design Portfolio

Overview: Having developed a director's concept for your peer's three-page play, you will produce a design portfolio for one of the following production aspects of that play: lighting, costumes, sound, or set. Conduct emotional research (find images that evoke the feeling that you would like to convey through your design) and practical research (find images from the place and time during which your play is set). Collect that research (at least three emotional images and three practical images). Then, provide renderings of your design. If you choose costume design, draw what the costumes would look like on the characters. If you choose lighting, draw the positions of the lights for certain scenes. If you choose sound, provide links where I can hear aspects of your sound design. If you choose set design, draw a ground plan, or a drawing of the set from above. Finally, provide a one paragraph explanation of your choices.

Your portfolio must contain the following components:

1. Research — Emotional & Practical

- Emotional Research: Collect at least three images (photographs, paintings, digital art, color swatches, etc.) that evoke the *emotional tone, atmosphere, or mood* you want your chosen design element to convey.
- Practical/Contextual Research: Collect at least three images representing the *time, place, culture, or environment* of the play setting—appropriate to where/when your play is set.
- For each image, include a caption (or short annotation) explaining what it contributes to your design thinking (e.g., "This image's soft, golden light suggests intimacy and nostalgia—useful for Scene 2's memory flashback").

2. Design Renderings (Sketches, Drawings, or Other Media)

Depending on your chosen design element:

- Costume design: Provide drawings/sketches (hand-drawn or digital) of each main character's costume—ideally from multiple views (front, side, back) and/or different states (e.g., everyday wear vs. dramatic moment).
- Lighting design: Provide a diagram (plan or perspective view) showing lighting positions (e.g., overhead, sidelights, footlights) for key scenes (at least 2–3 scenes). Indicate light types, angles, color/gels, intensity—as needed.
- Sound design: Provide a sound “mood board”—e.g., links (or embedded audio) to at least 2–4 sound clips or musical pieces that reflect ambient noise, thematic motifs, or transitions. Optionally provide a short script or cue-sheet showing when sounds will enter/exit.
- Set design: Provide a ground plan and/or a perspective drawing (or both)—enough to show where walls, doors/windows, furniture, entrances/exits, levels (if any), and scenic elements exist. If helpful, include approximate dimensions or scale.

3. Design rationale—one paragraph explanation

Write a concise paragraph explaining why you made the design choices you did. For example: how your emotional research informed the look/feel; how your practical research grounds the design historically or contextually; how design choices support character, theme, mood; how design supports dramatic action, transitions, or pacing.

Syllabus

THEA 203 - INTRODUCTION TO THEATRE (3)

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

We are mimetic creatures. Before spoken language or writing, we communicated through imitation. One of the reasons we were able to claw our way to the top of the food chain was through symbolic interaction, through performance. Theatre is a vestige of this vital communication technology. It is a memory machine. The art form is simultaneously ancient and new. It constantly reinvents itself. In an age of AI, social media, blockbuster special effects movies, and on-demand entertainment, theatre remains relevant. Why? Theatre involves role-playing, storytelling, politics, religion, and ritual. Using theatre, we can articulate and investigate social issues and the human experience. This course investigates the role of theatre as a vehicle for exploring meanings and cultural values throughout history. We will consider the contributions of storyteller, playwright, actor, director, designer, and audience to the theatrical event. We will also engage in practical theatrical production exercises.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this course, students will:

- Describe the collaborative roles of playwrights, performers, directors, designers, and audiences in the creation of theatre.
- Analyze how live theatre reflects and responds to cultural, political, and historical contexts across global traditions.
- Interpret and evaluate dramatic texts and performances using key concepts from theatre studies.
- Create original theatrical work through playwriting, performance, directing, and design.
- Reflect on the role of theatre in shaping identity, community, and social change.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Required Texts:

- *Theatrical Roles: An Introduction to Theatre*, a free Online Educational Resource available [here](#).

ASSIGNMENTS:

Participation: (20%)

If you have an issue that limits your ability to participate physically, please let me know, to the degree you feel comfortable.

- Pre-class preparation: (10%) For every assigned reading or video, complete a reading quiz, response paper, blog post, journal, etc., on Blackboard prior to class.
- In-class participation: (10%) Ask or answer questions, contribute to class discussions, small group discussions, and/or performative exercises, etc.

Practical Assignments (40%):

You will gain practical experience in each of the four production roles: playwright, performer, director, and designer (10% each).

- Unit 1: You will write and workshop a three-page play that reinterprets a fairy tale, allegory, myth, or other existing story for a contemporary audience.
- Unit 2: You will create a directing concept for a fellow student's three-page play.
- Unit 3: You will write and perform a one-minute monologue drawn from your three-page play.
- Unit 4: You will design one aspect of a production for one of your fellow students' three-page plays (set, lighting, costumes, or sound).

Performance Review: (15%)

You will attend three performances this semester and write a 1-2-page review for **one** production of your choice. Consider these three questions and provide specific examples:

- What do you think the director's concept was?
- How well did they realize that concept?
- Was it worth it?

Final Project: (25%)

In teams of five students, choose one of your three-minute plays or collaboratively devise a new one. You will rehearse and perform the piece. Each member of your team will perform in some capacity—whether in a lead or supporting role—as well as design one element of the production: the set, costumes, lights, sound, or script. These elements will be integrated into a team-approved director's concept. Once your team has a script for your final performance, rehearse and memorize that script with your fellow actors. In the final week of the term, you will present your performance in class.

GRADES:

Participation	20%		
Practical Assignments	40%		

Performance Review	15%		
Final Group Project	25%		
A	95-100	4.0	Excellent command and exploration of ideas and concepts, exemplary writing skills, and/or focused and well-organized.
A-	92	3.67	
B+	88	3.33	
B	85	3.0	Very good exploration of ideas and concepts, writing skills, and/or organization.
B-	82	2.67	
C+	78	2.33	
C	75	2.0	Satisfactory exploration of ideas and concepts, writing skills, and/or organization.
D	65	1.0	
F	64 - 0	0	

CLASSROOM POLICIES:

Attendance:

- Attend class ready to engage.
- Non-participants and tardies (7+ min. late) receive half-credit.
- Class notes and instructions will not be repeated for absentees.

- No-shows on a presentation day receive no credit.
- Please let me know if you plan to miss class for any reason.
- Excused absences will be granted for COVID-related illness, hospitalization, or the loss of an immediate family member. All other absences are unexcused. You do not need to provide documentation. I will take your word.
- Five or more unexcused absences result in automatic failure.

Course Attire:

This course is physical and requires non-restrictive clothing. Anything that could be pulled, caught, or yanked should be removed before class. Hair should be pulled back from the face.

Intimacy:

We will create original theatre performances in this class. You will not be asked to perform, intimacy, violence, or extreme physicality without:

- A qualified expert to create and set choreography.
- A conversation about context and storytelling.
- A clear and informed consent about specific choreography.
- Continued communication through the rehearsal and performance.
- 48 hours to agree to all intimacy, violence, or extreme physicality.

Email:

Please address emails professionally and allow twenty-four hours during the week for a response.

Late Work:

Please make every effort to turn in work on time. I will, however, accept late work with a one-letter-grade penalty (e.g.: A to B) for two weeks following an assignment's due date or on the final day of class, whichever comes first.

Peer Feedback Procedures:

- Statements of Meaning - What was rich, provocative, curious, intriguing?
- Writer Asks Questions - Respondents respond honestly, framing their opinions with "I" and only answering the question asked.
- Respondents ask neutral questions - What are you curious about in the writer's work?
- Permissioned opinions - Following the protocol:
- "I have an opinion about _____, would you like to hear it?"
- Writer outlines their plans for revision.

NOTES: 1.) Process is facilitated. 2.) Facilitator moves the process forward. 3.) Don't skip ahead, but you can always revisit a step. 4.) The purpose is to assist the writer in creating their best possible work. 5.) Avoid "fix-its" unless the writer requests a fix-it suggestion.

* This protocol for feedback adapted from Liz Lerman and John Borstel, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange.

Reading Quizzes, Response Papers, Journals, Blog posts, etc.:

I will periodically conduct quizzes, request one-page response papers, journal entries, blog posts, etc. to ensure that the class is reading. These will affect your participation grade.

COURSE SCHEDULE:

(This schedule is subject to change.)

Introduction to Introduction to Theatre			
Week 1		In class:	Read and discuss syllabus. Discuss the origins of theatre and ritual. Take the welcome survey. Make community agreements.
		Homework due:	Read <i>Theatrical Roles</i> , "Introduction," Cima.
		In class:	Watch "Theatre or Extinction – Choose!" Buckland. Discuss world theatre. Play theatre games.
The Playwright: Mary Kathryn Nagle – <i>Sovereignty</i> at Arena Stage (2019)			
Week 2		Homework due:	Read <i>Theatrical Roles</i> , "The Playwright," Cima.
		In class:	Discuss the craft of the playwright. Introduce 3-page play assignment. Playwriting exercises.
		Homework due:	Watch Interview with Mary Kathryn Nagle. Read <i>Sovereignty</i> , Nagle, Act I.

		In class:	Discuss Act I of <i>Sovereignty</i> .
Week 3		Homework due:	Read <i>Sovereignty</i> , Nagle, Act II.
		In class:	Discuss Act II of <i>Sovereignty</i> .
		Homework due:	3-page play due.
		In class:	Rehearse 3-page plays.
Week 4		In class:	3-page play readings.
		In class:	3-page play readings.
The Director: Mikael Burke – <i>The Magnolia Ballet</i> by Terry Guest at About Face (2022)			
Week 5		Homework due:	Read <i>Theatrical Roles</i> , “The Director,” Cima.
		In class:	Discuss the craft of the director. Choose one of your fellow students’ plays to direct. Introduce director’s concept assignment. Directing exercises.
		Homework due:	Watch Interview with Mikael Burke.
		In class:	Discuss Mikael Burke’s approach to directing.
Week 6		Homework due:	Read excerpt from <i>The Magnolia Ballet</i>, Guest. Watch clips from Mikael Burke’s production of <i>The Magnolia Ballet</i>.
		In class:	Discuss scene from <i>The Magnolia Ballet</i> , Guest.

		Homework due:	Director's concept due. See <i>Antigona Furiosa</i> by Griselda Gambaro, Feb 20–22, 26–28, Sally Stevens Players Theatre.
		In class:	Peer review director's concepts.
Week 7		Homework due:	Prepare director's concept presentation.
		In class:	Director's concept presentations.
		In class:	Director's concept presentations.
The Performer: Alys Dickerson - Ophelia in <i>Hamlet</i> by Shakespeare at American Players Theatre (2022)			
Week 8		Homework due:	Read <i>Theatrical Roles</i> , "The Performer," Cima.
		In class:	Discuss the craft of the performer. Introduce monologue assignment. Play theatre games.
		Homework due:	Watch Interview with Alys Dickerson.
		In class:	Discuss Alys Dickerson's approach to playing Ophelia.
Week 9		Homework due:	Read excerpts from <i>Hamlet</i> . Watch clips of Alys Dickerson performing Ophelia.
		In class:	Acting exercises based on Dickerson's practice.
		Homework due:	Monologues due.
		In class:	Rehearse monologues.

Week 10		Homework due:	Practice monologues.
		In class:	Perform monologues.
The Designers: Wilson Chin and Marcus Doshi – <i>Pass Over</i> by Antoinette Nwandu at Steppenwolf Theatre Company (2018), Ruth E. Carter, Twi McCallum			
		Homework due:	Read <i>Theatrical Roles</i> , “The Designer,” Cima. Watch Interview with Marcus Doshi.
		In class:	Discuss the craft of the designer. Discuss Marcus Doshi’s lighting designs. Introduce design assignment. Choose one of your fellow students’ plays to design. Designer exercises.
Week 11		Homework due:	Watch Interview with Wilson Chin.
		In class:	Discuss Wilson Chin’s set designs.
		Homework due:	Read “Dressing Wakanda to Seize a Vision,” Friedman.
		In class:	Discuss Ruth E. Carter’s costume designs.
Week 12		Homework due:	Watch “ Discussion with Broadway Sound Designer Twi McCallum ,” Singleton.
		In class:	Discuss production of <i>Comedy of Errors</i> . Discuss Twi McCallum’s sound designs.
		Homework due:	Designs due.
		In class:	Peer review of designs.

Week 13		Homework due:	Prepare design presentation.
		In class:	Design presentations.
		Homework due:	Prepare design presentation.
		In class:	Design presentations. Choose final project teams and roles.
Collaborations			
Week 14		Homework due:	Prepare for your final project role.
		In class:	First rehearsal.
		Homework due:	Final project work.
		In class:	Second rehearsal.
Week 15		Homework due:	Final project work.
		In class:	Discuss Spring Dance Concert. Third rehearsal.
Final Presentations			
		Homework due:	Final project work.
		In class:	Final project presentations.

Notes

[1] The term *mimesis* comes from ancient Greek philosophy and refers to imitation or representation. The concept was central to Aristotle's theory of drama, which argued that theatre imitates human action in ways that allow audiences to reflect on moral and emotional questions.

[2] Scholars have long debated whether theatre developed directly from ritual practices. While many cultures link performance traditions to religious ceremonies, historians caution that there is limited concrete evidence proving that ritual evolved into theatre in a linear historical progression.

[3] The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, attributed to Bharata Muni, is a foundational Sanskrit treatise on performance dating roughly between 200 BCE and 200 CE. It describes acting techniques, stage architecture, music, gesture, and aesthetic theory, including the concepts of *bhava* (emotion) and *rasa* (aesthetic flavor experienced by the audience).

[4] Japanese playwright and theorist Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443) helped codify the aesthetics of Nōh theatre. His writings emphasize subtlety, spiritual presence, and the concept of *yūgen*, a refined sense of mysterious beauty achieved through restrained performance.

[5] A *griot* is a West African storyteller, historian, and musician responsible for preserving genealogies, histories, and cultural memory through oral performance. Griots demonstrate how storytelling traditions can function simultaneously as education, history, and performance.

[6] The play *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* was developed collaboratively by South African artists Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona. Produced during the apartheid era, it used minimalist staging and actor storytelling to critique the pass-law system that restricted the movement and identity of Black South Africans.

[7] In the late twentieth century, directors began experimenting with performances that occur outside traditional proscenium stages. The proscenium theatre, dominant in Western theatre architecture since the seventeenth century, frames the stage with a large arch separating performers from spectators. This structure creates the “fourth wall,” an invisible boundary that allows audiences to observe the fictional world of the play as if looking through a picture frame. Practitioners such as Richard Schechner explored environmental theatre, in which performers and spectators share the same space and the performance unfolds around the audience rather than in front of them.

[8] The dramatic structure commonly known as *Freytag's Pyramid* was proposed by nineteenth-century German critic Gustav Freytag. It describes a five-part narrative structure—exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution—based on his analysis of classical and Shakespearean tragedies.

[9] Some theatre companies prioritize ensemble creation rather than a hierarchy centered on the director or playwright. Groups such as The Wooster Group and Complicité develop performances collaboratively through improvisation, physical experimentation, and collective dramaturgy.

[10] Although theatre has always required leadership, the modern role of the stage director developed in the nineteenth century. Figures such as Duke Georg II of Saxe-Meiningen established the practice of coordinating acting, scenery, and staging into a unified artistic vision.

[11] Russian actor and director Konstantin Stanislavski developed a systematic approach to acting in the early twentieth century emphasizing psychological motivation, objectives, and truthful emotional behavior. His work with the Moscow Art Theatre profoundly shaped modern acting training and influenced later techniques such as Method Acting.

[12] Stanislavski's ideas were adapted in the United States by teachers including Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner. Their interpretations produced different acting pedagogies, often collectively referred to as “Method Acting,” which emphasized emotional truth, personal memory, or spontaneous responsiveness depending on the teacher.

[13] German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht proposed *Epic Theatre* as an alternative to psychologically immersive realism. Brecht encouraged audiences to remain critically aware of the social issues represented onstage through techniques such as direct address, projections, and visible stage mechanics.

[14] A dramaturg is a literary and research specialist who assists a production team by providing historical context, script analysis, and audience engagement materials. The position originated in eighteenth-century German theatre, particularly in the work of playwright and critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

[15] The Yoruba *Egúngún* masquerade of West Africa is a performance tradition honoring ancestral spirits. Masked performers represent ancestors who return to advise and bless the community. These ceremonies combine ritual, dance, costume, and storytelling, illustrating how performance functions within religious and social life.

[16] In classical Indian performance theory, *bhavas* are the emotional states portrayed by performers, while *rasas* are the emotional “flavors” experienced by spectators. Traditional theory identifies nine primary *rasas*, including love, humor, anger, fear, and wonder.

[17] The *mēchanē* was a crane-like stage device used in ancient Greek theatre to lower actors portraying gods onto the stage. The practice inspired the phrase *deus ex machina* (“god from the machine”), now used to describe an unlikely or artificial plot resolution.

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GLOSSARY

A

Act | A major structural division of a play, often marking shifts in time, place, or dramatic action.

Actor | A performer who embodies a character in a theatrical production using voice, body, imagination, and emotional engagement.

Aesthetics | The study of beauty, art, and taste; in theatre, the principles that guide how performances look, sound, and feel.

Amphitheatre | A large, open-air performance space used in ancient Greece and Rome, designed for public gatherings and dramatic performances.

Audience | The people who witness a theatrical performance; their attention and responses are essential to the live event.

B

Bhava

| In Indian performance theory, *bhava* refers to the emotional states or feelings portrayed by a performer and experienced by a character within a dramatic work.

Blocking | The planned movement and positioning of actors onstage, developed to support storytelling and visual composition.

C

Catharsis | A concept from Aristotle describing the emotional release or purification experienced by audiences through tragedy.

Character | A fictional person or figure portrayed by an actor in a play.

Collaboration | The shared creative process through which theatre artists work together to produce a unified performance.

Costume | Clothing and accessories worn by performers that communicate character, time period, culture, and social identity.

Costume Design | The art of designing and selecting costumes to support storytelling and character development.

D

Design | The intentional shaping of visual, auditory, and spatial elements, such as scenery, lighting, costumes, and sound, to support performance.

Director | The artist responsible for interpreting the script and coordinating the artistic vision of a production.

Dramaturg | A theatre artist who supports productions through research, script analysis, historical context, and audience engagement.

E

Ensemble | A group of performers who work collaboratively, emphasizing collective storytelling over individual roles.

G

Gesture | A physical movement or action that communicates meaning, emotion, or intention.

L

Lighting Design | The artistic use of light to control visibility, mood, focus, and atmosphere in performance.

M

Mask | A face covering used in many global theatre traditions to represent characters, spirits, or archetypes.

Mēchanē | A crane-like device used in ancient Greek theatre to lower gods onto the stage, giving rise to the term *deus ex machina*.

Mime | A performance form that communicates story and emotion without spoken language.

Modernism | An artistic movement emphasizing experimentation, abstraction, and new forms, influential in twentieth-century theatre design.

N

Nāṭyaśāstra | An ancient Indian treatise on performance detailing acting, movement, music, and design principles.

Nōh Theatre | A classical Japanese theatre form characterized by masks, stylized movement, music, and spiritual themes.

P

Pageant Wagon | A mobile stage used in medieval Europe to present biblical plays in public spaces.

Performance | The live presentation of a theatrical work before an audience.

Play | A written dramatic work intended for performance.

Playwright | The author of a play.

Production | The realization of a script through rehearsal, design, and performance.

R

Rehearsal | The structured process through which a production is developed and refined.

Ritual | A symbolic, repeated action often connected to religious or cultural traditions.

S

Scenic Design (Set Design) | The creation of the physical environment in which a play's action takes place.

Script | The written text of a play, including dialogue and stage directions.

Sound Design | The creation and integration of music, effects, and ambient sound to support storytelling.

Stage Manager | The person responsible for organizing rehearsals, maintaining records, and coordinating performances.

T

Theatre | A live art form in which performers present stories to an audience through embodied action in shared space.

Theatricality | An awareness of performance as performance; the qualities that distinguish theatre from everyday life.

Tragedy | A dramatic genre focusing on serious themes, moral conflict, and human suffering.

W

World-Building | The process of creating a coherent theatrical environment that supports narrative and meaning.

Author and Contributors

Mikael Burke is a Princess Grace Award-winning director and Jeff Award recipient whose work spans Chicago and regional stages across the United States. In Chicago, he has directed for Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, Goodman Theatre, TimeLine Theatre Company, Chicago Children's Theatre, About Face Theatre, Remy Bumppo Theatre Company, Victory Gardens Theater, Northlight Theatre, Raven Theatre, Jackalope Theatre Company, First Floor Theater, American Theatre Company, Chicago Dramatists, The Story Theatre, Refracted Theatre Company, and Windy City Playhouse. His regional credits include productions at Yale Repertory Theatre, TheatreWorks Hartford, Forward Theatre, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, Indiana Repertory Theatre, Urbanite Theatre, TheatreWorks Colorado Springs, Asolo Repertory Theatre, Geva Theatre Center, Phoenix Theatre Indianapolis, and Third Avenue Playworks.

Burke is currently an Assistant Professor of Theatre-Acting in the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University, where he teaches performance and directing. He previously served as Associate Artistic Director of About Face Theatre and continues his relationship with the company as an Artistic Associate. He is also an Associate Artist with Remy Bumppo Theatre Company.

His directing work is known for its rigorous attention to text, ensemble-driven storytelling, and contemporary relevance, with a particular commitment to developing new work and amplifying underrepresented voices.

Wilson Chin is a New York-based scenic designer whose work spans Broadway, off-Broadway, opera, film, and television. His Broadway and touring credits include *Cost of Living* by Martyna Majok (Pulitzer Prize winner), *Pass Over* by Antoinette Chinonye Nwandu (Drama Desk, Lucille Lortel, and Henry Hewes Award nominations), *Next Fall*, and the international tour of *Annie*, including performances at Madison Square Garden starring Whoopi Goldberg.

His extensive off-Broadway and regional theatre work includes productions with Roundabout Theatre Company, Signature Theatre, Vineyard Theatre, MCC Theatre, Ma-Yi Theatre Company, The Public Theater, La Jolla Playhouse, Goodspeed Musicals, and many others. In opera, his designs have been seen at Washington National Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and the Canadian Opera Company, where he received a Dora Award.

Chin's film and television credits include Spike Lee's filmed adaptation of *Pass Over*, HBO's *Game Theory with Bomani Jones*, and NBC's *Blindspot*. He has served as an associate designer on numerous Broadway productions, including *Sunset Blvd.*, *A Doll's House*, and *& Juliet*.

He is co-chair of the American Theatre Wing's Obie Awards, a board member of United Scenic Artists Local 829 (Eastern Region), and a founding member of several arts advocacy organizations, including The 1/52 Project and Design Action. Chin has also served as an adjudicator and voter for the Tony Awards and other major theatre honors.

Gibson Alessandro Cima is an Associate Professor of Theatre History and Head of the Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Studies program in the School of Theatre and Dance at Northern Illinois University. His scholarship focuses on South African theatre and performance, theatre of the Global South, and postcolonial theory. His essays have appeared in *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Survey*, *Black Theatre Review*, and *South African Theatre Journal*.

Cima's current book project examines the influence of South Africa's anti-apartheid protest theatre on post-apartheid and global stages, tracing how activist performance practices circulate across national and political contexts.

As a theatre practitioner, he has devised performance work addressing Georgetown University's historical ties to slavery, directed the U.S. premiere of Juliet Jenkin's *The Boy Who Fell From the Roof*, and presented his own adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* at South Africa's National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. His work bridges scholarship and practice, emphasizing theatre's role in political memory, resistance, and social transformation.

Alys Dickerson is a Chicago-based actor originally from Indianapolis, Indiana, and a Master Actor with American Players Theatre, where this marks her fourth season. She holds an MFA from Northern Illinois University and has studied at the Moscow Art Theatre in Russia.

Dickerson's recent roles include Lady Macduff in *Macbeth*, The Jewish Wife in *Fear and Misery*, *Antigone* in *Antigone*, and The Commissioner in *Titanic: The Commission's Inquiry*. Since the pandemic, she has shifted much of her creative focus toward fostering conversations around racial fluency and equity through education programs at American Players Theatre.

She is a member of Actors' Equity Association and is deeply committed to work that blends artistic excellence with community engagement. Alys is one of six siblings and values faith, family, and good food.

Marcus Doshi is an internationally recognized theatre maker who designs lighting and scenery for theatre, opera, and dance, and collaborates with artists and architects on a wide range of interdisciplinary projects. His work is known for its bold visual clarity, musicality, and dramaturgical integration, guided by his manifesto, *Good Lighting for the Stage*. He is the author of *Towards Good Lighting for the Stage: Aesthetic Theory for Theatrical Lighting Design* (Routledge).

Doshi's work has been seen on and off Broadway, at major regional theatres, and at opera companies throughout the United States and internationally, including The Royal Opera House (London), Canadian Opera Company, La Monnaie (Brussels), Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, and Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia. Broadway credits include *Pass Over* and *Linda Vista*. His long-standing collaborations include Theatre for a New Audience and Opera Theatre of St. Louis.

He has received numerous award nominations, including Drama Desk, Lucille Lortel, Henry Hewes, and AUDELCO honors. Doshi is a Professor of Theatre at Northwestern University, where he teaches in the MFA design and directing programs.

Mary Kathryn Nagle is a playwright and attorney specializing in tribal sovereignty and Native rights. Born in Oklahoma City, she is an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. She earned her bachelor's degree from Georgetown University and her law degree, summa cum laude, from Tulane University Law School. Following law school, she clerked for two federal judges in the U.S. District Court for the District of Nebraska.

As an attorney, Nagle has litigated major cases involving Native sovereignty, including *Adoptive Couple v. Baby Girl* (2013), in which she argued before the U.S. Supreme Court to uphold the Indian Child Welfare Act. During law school, she began integrating legal advocacy with playwriting as a means of advancing Native voices.

She is an alumna of The Public Theater's Emerging Writers Group, where she developed *Manahatta*, a play that received national recognition and multiple awards. Her play *Sliver of a Full Moon* has been performed at the United Nations and leading law schools nationwide. With *Sovereignty*, commissioned by Arena Stage, Nagle became the first Native American playwright to have a work produced at that venue.