THEATER TERMS & DEFINITIONS

1. **Act**: a major division of a play. Acts may be further divided

into scenes. May be used to indicate a change in time or

place.

2. **Action**: the movement in the play from the initial

entanglement through the rising action, climax, and falling

action to resolution

3. **Actor**: one who performs a role or represents a character in

a play

4. **Angel**: the financial broker of a production. Formerly a

single wealthy person or small group of people. Now

producers look to large corporations for backing

5. **Antagonist**: the character who provides the obstacle to the

protagonist’s objective in the play. The antagonist sets

the conflict in motion

6. **Apron**: the area of the stage in front of the curtain line

7. Aristotle’s Six Elements of drama: character, diction,

music, plot, spectacle, thought

8. **Audition**: the opportunity to read for a part in a play

9. **Auditorium**: the part of the theater building that holds the

audience, also called the house

10. **Backdrop**: a flat surface the width of the stage, usually

made of canvas hanging from the flies at the rear of the

staging area and painted to represent the desired setting

11. **Backing**: flats, screens, and drops used backstage to mask

the audience’s sight lines through the door and windows f

the set

12. **Backstage**: the area behind the set or backdrop that is not

sees by the audience

13. **Bit, bit part**: a small role consisting of very few lines and

a brief stage appearance

14. **Blocking**: determining the basic movements of the actors

during a play. Some is provided by the playwright; some

develops by actors; but a majority is supplied by director

and includes entrances, exists, and crosses

15. **Booked flat**: two flats lashed together and opened at an

angle for form a “V”

16. **Boom**: also called a boomerang; a vertical pipe used to mount

a spotlight. Also a pole used to extend a microphone over a

set

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17. **Border**: a short drape hung above the stage to mask flies

when the set does not contain a ceiling

18. **Bridge**: a mechanical device for lifting larges pieces of

scenery

19. **Business, stage business**: all the actions, excluding

blocking, performed by the actors onstage (gesturing,

opening windows, writing letters, etc.)

20. **Call back**: the second stage in the audition process in which

actors who appeared for the initial reading and who are now

under serious consideration for the roles

21. **Cast**: the actors who perform in a given play

22. Casting: the process of auditions and interviews by which

the director selects the actors to play the roles in a play

23. **Catwalk**: a narrow metal bridge up in the flies by which

stage crews reach and adjust the hung scenery

24. **Centering**: an actor’s term for concentrating and being in

character in the moment of the play

25. **Center stage**: literally, the space at the very center of the

acting area

26. **Character**: a person in a play, or the personality of that

person

27. **Character role**: a major role in a play, but not one of the

romantic leads

28. **Cheat**: to turn the body out, partially toward the audience,

while appearing to talk to another character onstage

29. **Chiaroscuro**: the interplay of light and shadow as used in

stage lighting and scene painting

30. **Choreographer**: a person who designs the dance steps to be

used in a play

31. **Cold reading**: an audition where the actor is asked to read

from a script without any preparation

32. **Collaborative theater**: a situation in which actors and

directors work together to develop a script for a play

33. **Commedia del ‘arte**: 16th-18th century Italian comedy

34. **Comp**: a complimentary ticket to a show

35. **Company**: a group of actors and technicians who join together

to present plays

36. **Constructivism**: a concept in stage design in which the

illusion of scenery is created by juxtaposing ladders,

scaffolding and platforms to suggest houses, factories, and

public buildings

37. **Copyright**: the playwright’s legal ownership and control over

production of his/her play in public

38. **Costume**: clothing worn by the actors in a performance

39. **Counterweight system:** mechanical systems of pulleys, ropes,

and weights, such as sandbags used to hang scenery

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40. **Create a role**: to be the first actor to play a role in its

premier performance

41. **Cross**: a stage direction meaning to move across the stage

from one side to the other. TO cross down means to cross

while moving downstage

42. **Cross fade**: to fade or dim the lighting from one setup of

the lighting control board

43. **Cue**: a signal from the stage manager to actor, stage crew,

props manager or lighting technician that some

predetermined action, such as an entrance is required

44. **Curtain**: literally, the drape in a proscenium arch theater

that closes off the stage from the audience’s view

45. **Curtain line**: the last line of the scene; serves as a signal

to bring down the curtain

46. **Deck**: stage floor

47. **Dialog**: speech between two or more characters

48. **Dimmer**: an electrical device to lower or raise the intensity

of a stage light

49. **Director**: the person responsible for the direction of the

actors in a play; provides the play’s “vision”

50. **Directorial notes**: the comments and criticisms the director

presents to the cast after a performance or rehearsal

51. **Dramatic irony**: the form of irony in which the audience

knows something that a character in the play does not

52. **Dramatic time**: a period of time that elapses in the action

of the play, as opposed to the actual time it takes to run

the show

53. **Dramatis personae**: from the Latin, meaning the characters in

a play

54. **Dramaturg**: one who studies a play to interpret it for a

company of actors

55. **Draw line**: the operating line of a traveling curtain rigging

56. **Dresser**: one who assists an actor by laying out costumes and

makeup, and assisting with changing and hairdressing

57. **Dressing the stage**: loosely used to mean decorating a set

58. **Dress parade**: a wardrobe check during which actors wear

their various costume changes that enable the director and

costumer to check on the effect of the colors under

lighting, the fit, the suitability, etc.

59. **Dress rehearsal**: the last rehearsal before the play is

performed. Treated as a performance, it is done in full

costume, full tech effects and played straight through

without stopping

60. **Drop**: a large piece of canvas mounted at the rear of the

stage and long enough to reach the floor painted with a

scene serving as a backdrop to the action

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61. **Effects**: onstage and offstage sounds made by sound effect

technician. Also, patterns and shadowing created by

lighting

62. **Empathy**: the act of an audience identifying with the

character in the play

63. **Entr’acte**: musical interlude between the acts of a play

64. **Entrance**: the act of entering onto the acting area during a

performance

65. **ERF**: Ellipsoidal reflector floodlight: a device for throwing

a broad wash of light over a wide area without having a

sharp edge to the beam

66. **Exit**: the leaving of the acting area by the actor

67. **Fade**: a gradual dimming of the intensity of the stage

lighting

68. **Farce**: French, meaning “to stuff”. Farce is an extreme form

of comedy that depends on quick tempo and flawless timing

on the part of the actors; stuffed with improbably events

and farfetched coincidences

69. **Fill light**: a soft light or wash that comes from the

opposite direction of the key light and provides a

difference in intensity or color from the accent light on

the actor’s face

70. **Flat**: a basic unit of stage scenery. Usually consists of a

wooden frame with canvas or muslin stretched to fill it

71. **Flies**: the area above the stage, hidden from the audience to

which scenery can be lifted clear of the stage

72. **Flipper**: a jog, or narrow flat, usually made of plywood

hinged to a standard flat to help support the flat as it

stands alone

73. **Flood**: used as a shortened term for floodlight. The term

also refers to the widespread focus on a spotlight having

the effect of flooding the stage with light

74. **Fly(ing)**: to fly scenery is to hoist it to or from the flies

75. **Focus**: the adjustment of the size and shape of a beam from a

stage light

76. **Follow cue**: a lighting direction that comes so close to

another lighting direction that it doesn’t need a separate

number on the cue sheet of the lighting tech

77. **Forestage/apron**: the space in front of the curtain line

78. **Fresnel**: (fr’nel) a spotlight with a stepped lens of

concentric rings. Casts a pool of light with soft edges

that blends with other lights

79. **Front lighting**: lighting that comes from the house and

shines onto the stage

80. **Front of the house**: those parts of the theater used by the

audience

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81. **Gel**: a very thin sheet of gelatin, available in a wide range

of colors, set in a frame and mounted in front of a light

in order to color the beam directed onto the set

82. **Gobo**: also called a ‘cookie’. A disc of heat resistant

material into which a pattern (circle, stars, etc) has been

cut. When the gobo is placed over the lens of an

ellipsoidal spotlight, the pattern is projected onto a

backdrop

83. **Goes up**: the time the performance begins

84. **Grand drape**: a very short curtain hanging at the top of the

proscenium arch and in front of the main curtain

85. **Greasepaint**: a type of stage makeup having a very greasy

texture

86. **Green room**: a room backstage where actors wait

87. **Grid/gridiron**: the framework of wood or steel above the

stage from which scenery is hung or flown

88. **Grip**: a member of the stage crew, so called because he/she

grips the scenery to move or place it

89. **Halation**: an unwanted leaking of light from a spotlight

forming a halo around the light beam

90. **Hit your mark**: a direction for an actor to go to a certain

place on stage and deliver a line; make an entrance, or

perform some stage business

91. **Hot spot**: an area downstage right that many actors feel is

an especially good focal point

92. **House**: the seating area of a theatre, but also the audience

itself

93. **House curtain**: in a proscenium arch theater, the main

curtain that closes off the stage from the view of the

audience

94. **House manager**: one who oversees or runs the box office where

reservations are taken and tickets sold

95. **House right/left**: directions viewed from the perspective of

the audience, as distinguished from the perspective of the

actors, which would be stage left/right

96. **Implicit directions**: stage directions implied in the lines

of the play

97. **Incident light**: light falling on a surface, actor,

furniture, or set directly above

98. **Iris**: a reducing mat used over the face of a spotlight in

order to narrow the beam of light

99. **Jack**: a wooden triangular brace hinged to the back of a flat

to provide support

100. **Jackknife**: a rolling cart used to change scenery, attached

to the stage floor at one place and pivoted so that it can

be moved on and off stage

101. **Jog**: see flipper

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102. **Jump lines**: when an actor speaks one or more lines ahead

103. **Key light**: a light on an actor’s face that appears to be

coming from a source—lantern, lamp, fireplace, onstage, but

which, in fact, is coming from conventional stage lighting

instruments

104. **Klieg light**: a type of spotlight sold by the Klieg

brothers, but their term is used loosely for any bright

stage light

105. **Ladder**: a hanging ladder-like framework on which spotlights

are mounted

106. **Lamp**: the proper name for a light bulb; also, the term for

any lighting instrument; part of a spotlight

107. **Lash lines**: number 8 sash cords used with staggered lash

cleats to fasten on flat to another

108. **Lighting plot**: detailed plan by the lighting designer that

includes a floor plan of the set with a longitudinal

section—called an elevation—showing the height of the set,

a lighting instrument schedule, and a control board cue

sheet. The floor plan and longitudinal section shows the

location of each lighting instrument and the area lit. The

longitudinal section also shows the vertical angles of the

beams of light. The instrument schedules shows the type,

wattage, outlet, dimmer, and color of each instrument—a

range from 100% for full; up to 10% for very dim. The

lighting tech uses the plot when running the lights for the

show

109. **Light leak**: an unwanted spill of light through a crack in

the scenery or an open door on the set

110. **Linear plot**: one that follows a strict chronological order

from start to finish with no flashbacks or flash forwards

111. **Line reading**: the manner in which an actor delivers a line:

the inflections, tone, volume, and pace

112. **Lines**: the dialogue for a play; the words the actors say in

a performance

113. **Load in**: to place the set on the stage where the play is to

be performed

114. **Makeup**: the cosmetics that actors use onstage

115. **Manager**: British term for the producer of a show

116. **Mark**: the mark, literally on the floor or established

during rehearsal from which actors deliver their lines

117. **Mat**: shutter or matting material that is used on the face

of a spotlight lens to change the size or shape of the beam

cast onto the set

118. **Matinee**: a theatrical performance given in the afternoon

119. **Method acting**: an introspective approach to acting based on

the system developed by Constantine Stanislavsky in the 20th

century

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120. **Monolog**: a work written to be spoken by just one person

121. **Motif**: a recurrent character, incident, or concept in

literature

122. **Motivation**: the reason a character does something

123. **Movement**: stage blocking, or the movements of the actors

onstage as the play progresses

124. **Noises off**: any sound effects needed for a dramatic

production, from the thunder sheet to tape-recorded

rainfall

125. **Obligatory scene**: a scene the playwright hassled the

audience to expect, one that answers questions raised

earlier in the play

126. **On/off book**: when an actor has the lines of his/her part

completely memorized, the actor is off book. To “sit on

book” is to prompt the actors in rehearsal

127. **Off/on stage**: when off, an actor is out of sight of the

audience; when on, an actor is in sight of the audience

128. **Olivette**: a box floodlight that can be mounted on a stand

or hung by a chain from a pipe batten

129. **Opening**: the first public performance of a play

130. **Overture**: the music played before a musical play begins;

generally it is a medley of tunes from the show to be

performed

131. **Pace**: the speed with which a play is performed

132. **Pants part**: a male role played by a female

133. **Papering the house**: giving out free tickets to fill the

house for a performance

134. **Par**: short for parabolic reflector lamp. It is made of

molded heat-resistant glass that can be used safely

outdoors. Indoors, its build-in reflector makes it an

economical choice for small to medium-sized theaters

135. **Persona**: the character an actor assumes in a play

136. **Picture**: the general look of the set as seen from an

average seat in the house

137. **Pin spot**: a very narrow spotlight beam, focused on an

actor’s head. Also called the head spot

138. **Pit**: the area between the stage and the first tow of the

house, where the orchestra sits

139. **Playbill**: the program

140. **Plot**: the events of a play; the story as opposed to the

theme

141. **Practical scenery**: scenery that actually works on stage

142. **Premier**: the first public performance of a play

143. **Presentational**: a style of performance in which the actor

recognizes and addresses the audience, in contrast to

representational style in which the actors observe the

convention of a fourth wall

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144. **Preset**: an arrangement of the lighting board controls

prepared in advance of its need

145. **Principals**: the leading characters in a play

146. **Producer**: the person who puts together a theatrical

production: obtains financial backing; leasing the rights

to the play; rents the theater, hires the director,

designer, house and stage crews, supervises the advertising

and budget, and, sometimes, hires the cast

147. **Prompt book**: the stage manager’s copy of the script in

which are noted all the blocking and technical cues

148. **Prompt corner**: the area just behind the proscenium arch at

stage left where the prompter sits with the prompt book

149. **Properties manager**: the person responsible for acquiring

all the props needed for a play, placing them where they

belong on the set, handling them to the actors as needed,

getting them back after a performance and creating offstage

effects as called for by the script

150. **Props**: short for stage properties. These are usually

divided into four categories: hand props; set or scene

props; dress props; and effects not produced in the

lighting booth (doorbells, knocking, crashes, etc.)

151. **Proscenium arch**: the picture frame through which an

audience watches the play in a proscenium arch theater

152. **Purchase line**: the rope held by a member of the stage crew

to fly the scenery in a counterweight system

153. **Reader’s theater**: a performance at which a play is red

aloud for an audience rather than memorized and presented

off book

154. **Reflector**: a hood of polished metal, shaped into a sphere,

a parabola, or an ellipsoid, with a light source at its

center

155. **Rehearsal**: a session in which the director and actors

prepare a play for performance

156. **Relation to characters**: an establishment of relationships

in a play so that actors who play characters connected by

blood, marriage, friendship or conflict will act as though

they have been involved in actual relationships and will

not give the impression they just met in rehearsal

157. **Relation to objects**: an establishment of relationships in a

play so that actors using certain objects or wearing

certain clothes will act as if these items are really

theirs

158. **Repertoire**: all parts an actor has played, or all the plays

he/she is familiar with

159. **Repertory company**: a theater group that performs the plays

in the season’s repertoire, with members taking large parts

in some plays and small parts in others

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160. **Return**: two flats hinged together to fold outward, back-toback.

Because they open away from the audience, they may

serve to make offstage areas.

161. **Review**: the announcement in print or broadcast media of a

production with some description of the cast, plot, and

technical aspects

162. **Revival**: a play performed sometime after its original

production

163. **Revolve**: a revolving stage

164. **Revue**: a production featuring a collection of songs,

dances, or sketches

165. **Rigging**: the process of hanging scenery or lights; the

handling of the stage curtain or drops. Also the complete

system of ropes, block, and pins for manipulating scenery

166. **Role**: a part in a play; the character played by an actor

167. **Run lines**: to recite the lines of a play without the

accompanying blocking or stage business

168. **Run of the play**: the length of time a play is presented in

a series of consecutive performances

169. **Run-through**: a rehearsal at which an entire scene, act, or

play is done without stopping for changes or corrections

170. **Safety curtain**: a fireproof sheet of heavy fabric that can

be lowered in front of the house curtain in a proscenium

arch

171. **Sandbag**: a canvas bag filled with sand and used as a

counterweight or a scenery flying system

172. **Scenario**: a film or TV script

173. **Scene**: a division of an act or of the play itself

174. **Scenery**: the background forms—walls, archways, sky, trees,

skyline, stairs—that provide the setting for the play

175. **Scene shop, bay, dock**: the shop is the area where scenery

is built and painted, where materials are stored, and where

a setting can be assembled on a trial basis

176. **Scrim**: a dark-blue theatrical gauze sturdier than

commercial gauze. One or more thicknesses of it are hung as

a drop in front of a scene

177. **Serlian wing**: permanent set pieces used in pairs to create

perspective

178. **Set designer**: the person responsible for designing and

overseeing the construction of the stage setting

179. **Set piece**: a scene from a play that can be performed out of

context and still makes sense

180. **Set(ting):** the surroundings in which the action of the play

develops

181. **Sharp focus**: the narrowest beam of light from a stage light

182. **Shutters**: See gobo/mat

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**183. Sides**: portions of a script containing one actor’s line and

**cues**

184. **Sight lines**: imaginary lines from the audience to the stage

185. **Sizing**: a preparation used to fill in the pores of a

surface. Sizing on flats and drops is used to prevent

excess paint absorption

186. **Small work**: subtle facial expressions and gestures used to

illuminate character. Called “eyelash and fingernail

acting”

187. **Soliloquy**: a speech in which an actor, usually alone on

stage, speaks his/her thoughts aloud

188. **Special**: an arrangement of stage lighting to define or

emphasize a specific position on stage

189. **Speeches**: the lines said by an actor each time he/she

speaks

190. **Spotlight**: a light with a lens that throws an intense on a

defined area. Plano-Convex, Fresnel, ellipsoidal spot.

191. **SRO**: standing room only

192. **Stage**: the area where the action of a play takes place; to

“stage” a play means to rehearse and then perform it

193. **Stage crew**: the backstage technical crew responsible for

running the show

194. **Stage directions**: notes added to the script of a play,

generally in italics or parentheses that provide the line

readings, business, blocking, etc.

195. **Stage door**: located at the back or side of the theater, it

opens directly to the backstage area

196. **Stage left/right**: areas on the stage as seen from the

actor’s perspective, as opposed to the house left and right

197. **Stage manager**: the person responsible for overseeing all

the backstage elements of a production: scheduling,

rehearsals, keeping the prompt book, rehearsing the

understudies, etc.

198. **Stock characters**: those who represent particular

personality types or characteristics of human behavior

199. **Stock company**: a resident company of actors presenting a

series of plays for limited runs

200. **Straw hat circuit**: summer theaters around the country that

book equity companies to hit shows to play for a week or

two

201. **Strike the set**: to dismantle the setting of a play and

reduce it to its basic elements at the end of the run

202. **Strong curtain**: an act that ends with a dramatically

powerful line or action

203. **Structure**: the overall framework or organization of the

dramatic materials. Plays are structured in scenes and acts

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204. **Style**: the distinctive behavior, dress, and language of the

characters

205. **Stylization**: the shaping of dramatic material, settings, or

costumes in a deliberately nonrealistic manner

206. **Sunday**: a knot used to tie several lines together to lift

scenery

207. **Switchboard**: the control panel for working the stage

lighting

208. **Tails**: ropes dropped from a batten to hang scenery several

feet below the batten instead of directly from it

209. **Take direction**: an actor’s ability to understand and

duplicate a line reading given by the director, or an

actor’s ability to respond accurately to suggestions about

characterizations given by the director

210. **Teaser**: the horizontal drape at the top of a stage in a

proscenium arch

211. **Tech rehearsal**: a rehearsal devoted to trying out the

technical aspects of a production—scenery changes, costume

changes, effects, sound cues, etc.

212. **Tempo**: the pace of a scene or play

213. **Tension**: the state of anxiety induced in the audience

214. **Tetralogy**: a group of four plays by the**Theater**: the total artistic experience of drama, either by

the presenter or by the audience. Also, a building where

plays are presented. Also, a movement or a style of

presentation in the evolution of the theater

216. **Theater-in-the-round**: a form of play presentation in which

the audience surrounds the acting area

217. **Theme**: what the play means as opposed to what happens

218. **Thespis**: A Greek poet (550-500 b.c.) usually considered the

founder of drama

219. **Thrust stage**: a low platform stage surrounded on three

sides by the audience

220. **Timing**: this term includes the setting of cues for effects,

stage business, and lighting for maximum effectiveness

221. **Tone**: the playwright’s attitude toward his/her material

222. **Top hat**: a short metal cylinder used to control a light

beam

223. **Tormentor**: the vertical drape that masks the wings at each

side of the proscenium arch

224. **Type casting**: the casting of roles in a play by choosing

actors who most closely resemble the physical and

personality description of the characters

225. **Understudy**: one who is prepared to take over an important

role should the actor playing the role miss a performance

226. **Unities**: three principles of dramatic structure required in

a play: unity of time, action, place

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227. **Unit set**: an arrangement of scenery in which some or all of

the pieces can be used in different combinations for

different scenes

228. **Upstage**: standing upstage of another actor, forcing him or

her to face away from the audience

229. **Utility**: in a stock company, the actor who plays minor

roles in all types of plays for a small salary

230. **Voice projection**: control of loudness so that even those in

the last row can hear and understand every word of dialogue

in the play

231. **Wagon**: a rolling cart used for moving scenery

232. **Wardrobe mistress**: the technical stag member responsible

for the care of the show costumes

233. **Wash**: a soft, single-color light that bathes the set

234. **Wing**: a canvas-covered flat, painted black or to match the

set, and mounted at the side of a backdrop to mask the

sides of the set. Also refers to a single flat

235. **Wings**: the area immediately offstage left and right where

actors stand to await their cues

236. **Workshop**: a place for putting together and polishing a

production

237. **Workshop production**: a work in progress. The playwright and

director, and sometimes the actors as well, continue to

work on a play as the present it to a paying or nonpaying

preview audience