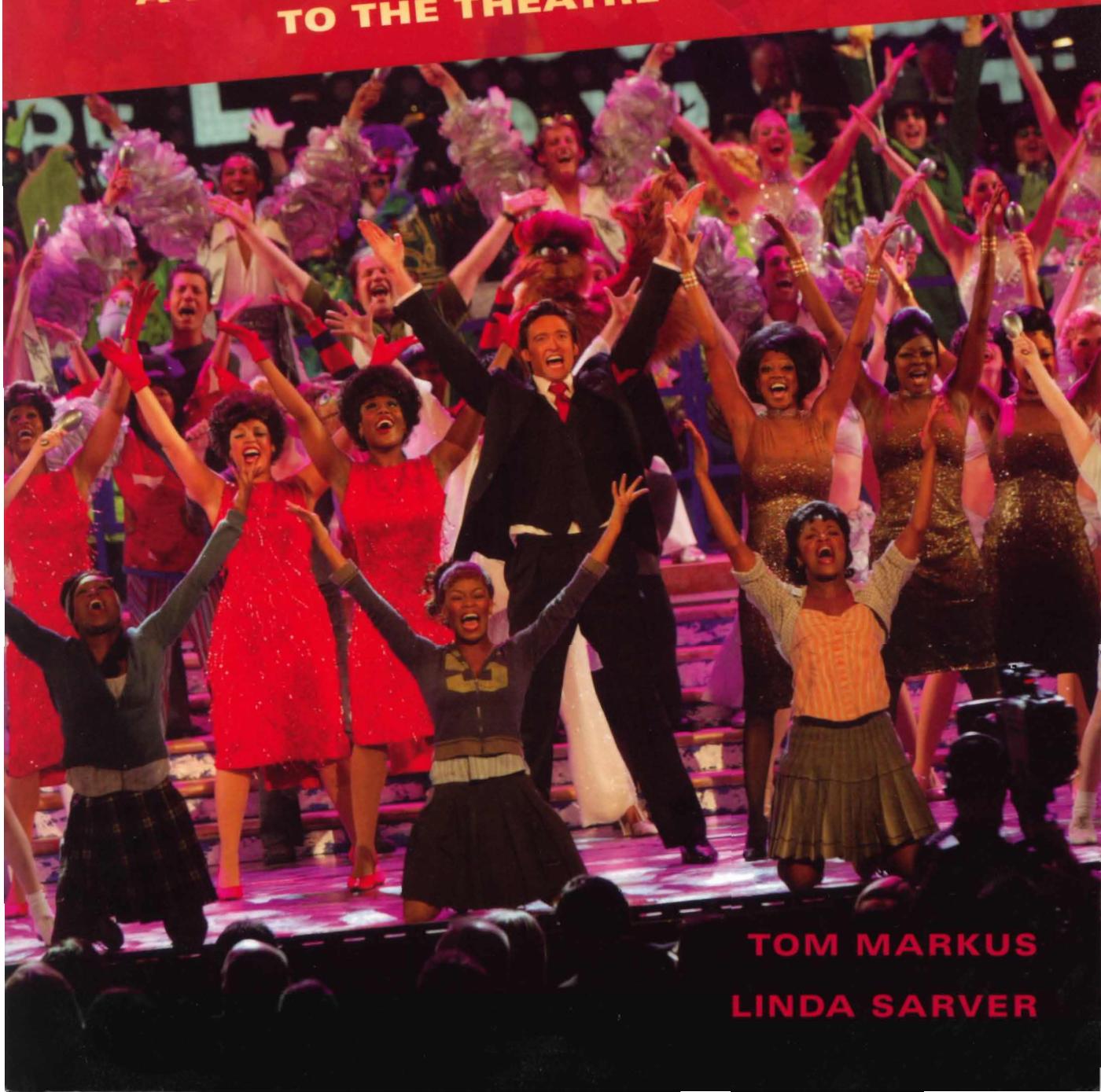


ANOTHER OPENING, ANOTHER SHOW

A LIVELY INTRODUCTION
TO THE THEATRE

SECOND EDITION



TOM MARKUS
LINDA SARVER

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What Is Theatre?

THEATRE IS FUN

For over two thousand years, people have gone to the theatre for entertainment. Each night on Broadway, thousands of people rush to the theatre to have a good time, and people in your home town and on your campus go to the theatre eager to be entertained. If you are an experienced theatregoer, the question “What is theatre?” will give you food for thought. If you have never seen a play, the question will prompt you to discover the excitement, the stimulation, and—yes—the fun of theatre.

Theatre is storytelling. Whether the stories are sad or happy, they capture our imagination. We all like to hear a good story, and theatre people are very skilled storytellers. If you stumble on a group of theatre students, you’ll probably hear them laughing as they tell each other about their triumphs and mishaps. Actors’ autobiographies are filled with comic incidents from their careers, and when actors are guests on TV talk shows, their “war stories” entertain millions. Your instructors will probably share with you some of their own favorite stories.

All these anecdotes reveal the joyous *playfulness* of theatre. But theatre stories also teach us something about the theatre as well as about human behavior, political ideas, social problems, or other aspects of our culture. The stories that begin this book will prepare you for the lighthearted tone of the frequently challenging ideas that follow.

FLYING FISH AND DYING VILLAINS

There are many funny stories that explain how theatre works. Here are two of our favorites.

I (Tom) was hired by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival to direct a production of Shakespeare’s rollicking comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The central character is Sir John Falstaff, a fat and foolish middle-aged nobleman who attempts to seduce two very respectable married women in the city of

Windsor. He deludes himself into thinking that these women will adore him. They, however, find Falstaff ludicrous and decide to play tricks that will humiliate him. Mrs. Ford invites him to her home, but when he arrives she excitedly tells him that her insanely jealous husband is returning unexpectedly, so he'd better sneak out of the house before he's discovered. The two women hide Falstaff in a wicker basket of dirty laundry. Later, the audience learns that Falstaff was thrown into the river along with the soiled sheets and towels.

The actors and I decided to bring Falstaff back on stage for his next entrance dripping wet from his filthy dunking. We hoped the audience would laugh at the sight of him. In rehearsals, I suggested that the actor carry his boots, as though he had taken them off because they were wet. Then he could turn one boot upside down and pour out the water that had filled it. We hoped for a second laugh from this sight gag. Then someone suggested that Falstaff reach into the other boot and pull out a fish! We found some frozen rainbow trout at the grocery store, and when we thawed them out they flopped about in the actor's hand as if they'd just been pulled out of the river. We hoped for a third laugh when the audience saw the fish. The actor came up with the idea that Falstaff had caught a cold from having been tossed into the river, so he could give a big "Ah-choo!" to prompt more laughs. At one rehearsal I suggested, "Why don't you hold the fish by the tail, turn away from the audience, give a big sneeze, and toss the fish over your head and out into the audience?" "Are you *serious*?" the actor asked. "Nobody's going to want to get hit by a fish!" I replied, "Trust me; for the one person who might not like it, the other 999 will howl with laughter. Everybody loves to see someone else in trouble." We debated the idea, we rehearsed it, and on opening night the actor threw the fish (Figure 1.1).

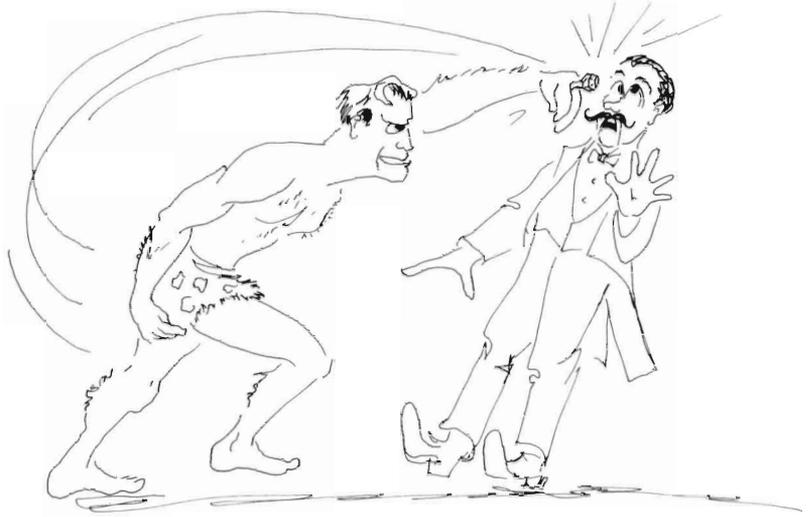
The audience howled, but things didn't go exactly as planned. The actor turned, sneezed, and tossed the fish. The audience laughed, but while the actor waited for the laughter to subside, somebody tossed the fish back onto the stage. When the actor turned around, he saw the fish lying on the stage, mistakenly assumed he had failed to hit the audience with it, turned his back again, sneezed again, tossed the fish again, and turned back toward the audience. The fish came flying back onto the stage. The audience was exploding in laughter. The actor picked up the fish and carried it offstage when he exited. But he saved it for the curtain call, and when he took his bow, he tossed the fish back into the audience one final time. The comic business was a triumph. The production continued delighting large audiences for several performances, until one night a surprise occurred. Word had spread about the flying fish, and when Falstaff turned his back, sneezed, and tossed the fish over his head, *twenty fish came flying up onto the stage!*

Before you stop to consider what this first story illustrates, read the next one, an anecdote often told in theatrical circles. We don't know whether it really happened, but it's a funny story that illustrates the point we're trying to make. Johnny Weismuller, a movie star who played the role of Tarzan in



Figure 1.1 Falstaff's flying fish.

Figure 1.2 “I keel you weeth my poison ring!”



many films, was celebrated for his muscles, innocent charm, and monosyllabic dialogue that prompted parodies like “Me Tarzan, you Jane.” The story goes that early in his career he performed some stage roles. Usually he was cast in melodramas, playing the honorable jungle boy so he could show off his physique by striding around in his loincloth before saving the virgin from the villain. One play required him to shoot the bad guy late in the third act. Weismuller wrestled the pistol from the villain and fired. Click! The stage gun misfired. The audience rustled its programs. A second click. This time the stage manager’s offstage gun misfired. The audience smiled. Thinking quickly, Weismuller plucked his dagger from his waistband, leaped across the stage, and stabbed the villain—but the knife had a rubber blade, and the audience could see it bend against the villain’s chest. By now the audience was laughing, and the villain wanted to be “dead” in the worst way. What to do? Looking about him wildly, Weismuller saw the curtains on the window, ripped them down, wrapped them around the bad guy’s neck, and started to strangle him, with both actors using a lot of body English. But the flimsy curtain ripped apart in Weismuller’s hands. By now, the theatre was rocking with laughter and the actors were fighting the giggles as they tried to find a way out of their problem. Weismuller was wringing his hands when he felt the large ring he was wearing. Confidently, he strode to the cowering villain, pressed his ring against the actor’s forehead, and said in a full voice, “I keel you weeth my poison ring” (Figure 1.2).

Both stories are based on something going wrong, and we find the stories funny because we know how things are supposed to happen in the theatre. In both stories, things happened unexpectedly—and both the audience and the actors knew it. The stories illustrate two simple notions: learning

about theatre can be fun, and the more you learn about how theatre works, the more you will understand and enjoy the experience.

DEFINING THEATRE

In this chapter, we'll analyze and explain each part of our definition of theatre. Don't try to memorize it; rather, use it as a reference point for the discussion that follows.

EXPOSITION

Theatre is a unique live event that involves actors and audience, that happens in a particular place at a particular time, that takes place in the present tense and yet has a predetermined structure, that uses understood conventions to communicate through all five senses, and that has a lasting impact on the audience.

Have you figured out that our definition is a thinly disguised list? We admit it, and next we will explain each item on the list:

Ten Traits of Theatre

FORESHADOWING

Ten Traits of Theatre

1. A live event
2. Actors
3. Audience
4. A particular place
5. A particular time
6. The present tense
7. A predetermined structure
8. Understood conventions
9. Communication through all five senses
10. A lasting impact

A Live Event Theatre is a **live event** that takes place only once. It's like a rock concert or a religious service. No matter how carefully the play is rehearsed, each performance results in a different experience. That *experience* is what we call "theatre." Just as the guitarist's riffs change each time he plays a song, so too a theatrical experience is unique at each performance. The actors'