

Unit 13

Performance spaces

Text 1

In theatre or performance arts, the *stage* (sometimes referred to as the *deck* in stagecraft) is a designated space for the performance of productions. The stage serves as a space for actors or performers and a focal point (the *screen* in cinema theaters) for the members of the audience. As an architectural feature, the stage may consist of a platform (often raised) or series of platforms. In some cases, these may be temporary or adjustable but in theaters and other buildings devoted to such productions, the stage is often a permanent feature.

There are several types of stages that vary as to the usage and the relation of the audience to them. The most common form found in the West is the *proscenium* stage. In this type, the audience is located on one side of the stage with the remaining sides hidden and used by the performers and technicians. *Thrust stages* may be similar to proscenium stages but with a platform or performance area that extends into the audience space so that the audience is located on three sides. In *theatre in the round*, the audience is located on all four sides of the stage. The fourth type of stage incorporates created and found stages which may be constructed specifically for a performance or may involve a space that is adapted as a stage.

20 Proscenium stage: Since the Italian Renaissance, the most common stage used in the West has been the proscenium stage which may also be referred to as a *picture frame stage*. The primary feature is a large opening known as the *proscenium arch* through which the audience views the performance. The audience directly faces the stage --which is typically raised several feet above front row audience level-- and views only one side of the scene. This one side is commonly known as the

invisible *fourth wall* of the scene. The proscenium arch evolved from the *proskenium* in Ancient Greek theaters. This was the space in front of the *skênê* or backdrop where the actors actually played. [...] The proscenium, in conjunction with stage curtains called *legs*, conceals the sides of the stage, which are known as the *wings*. The wings may be used by theatre personnel during performances and as storage spaces for scenery and theatrical properties. Several rows of short curtains across the top of the stage, called *teasers*, hide the backdrops, which in turn are hidden above the stage in the fly system loft until ready for use.

Often, a stage may extend in front of the proscenium arch which offers additional playing area to the actors. This area is referred to as the *apron*. Underneath and in front of the apron is sometimes an orchestra *pit* which is used by musicians during musicals and operas. The orchestra pit may sometimes be covered and used as an additional playing space in order to bring the actors closer to the audience. The stage is often raised higher than the audience. Space above some proscenium stages may include a fly loft where curtains, scenery, and battens supporting a variety of lighting instruments may hang.

The numerous advantages of the proscenium stage have led to its popularity in the West. Many theatrical properties and scenery may be utilized. Backdrops, curtains and lighting can be used to greater effect without risk of rigging being visible to the audience. Entrances and exits can be made more graceful; surprise becomes possible. The actors only have to concentrate on playing to the audience in one direction.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stage_\(theatre\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stage_(theatre))

Reading comprehension and vocabulary exercises

A. Find words in the text that mean the following.

- 1. impermanent _____
- 2. positioned, placed _____
- 3. to develop _____
- 4. to hide _____
- 5. many _____

B. In groups of three or four, discuss the following questions. Numbers in brackets refer to lines in the text.

1. a focal point (3) is a: (a) main, (b) minor, (c) obscure, (d) secondary point.
2. Is there a difference in meaning between *temporary* (6), *transient*, and *transitory*? Are they all used in similar contexts?
3. Where does the main difference between a thrust stage and a proscenium arch stage lie?
4. *incorporates* (17) means: (a) excludes, (b) includes, (c) disembodies, (d) transmutes, (e) transforms.
5. *the invisible fourth wall* (27). Why invisible?
6. Explain *theatrical properties* (33). What is the abbreviation for this term?
7. Explain *batten* (43).

C. Complete the following table with other forms of the words given. Use a dictionary or other resources to help you if necessary.

noun	noun	adjective
scene	_____	_____
stage	_____	_____
_____	performance	_____
space	_____	_____
_____	production	_____
_____	architecture	_____

Now read on to find out more about several other types of stages.

Text 2

5 Theatre in the round: This method of stage design consists of a stage situated in the centre of the theatre, with the audience facing it from all sides. The audience is placed quite close to the action which provokes a feeling of intimacy and involvement. In-the-round stages require special considerations in production such as: Scenery that does not obscure actors and the rest of the stage from parts of the audience. Backdrops and curtains cannot be used, thus the director must find other ways to set the scene. Lighting design is more difficult than 10 for a Proscenium stage, since the actor must be lit from all sides without blinding nearby audience members. Entrances and exits must be made either through the audience, making surprise entrances very difficult, or via closed-off walkways, which must be inconspicuous. As a result, stage entrances are normally in the corners of the theatre. The actors need to ensure that they do not have their backs turned to 15 any part of the audience for long periods of time, in order to be seen and heard clearly.

20 Thrust stage: A thrust stage is one that extends into the audience on three sides and is connected to the backstage area by its upstage end. A thrust has the benefit of greater intimacy between the audience and performers than a proscenium, while retaining the utility of a backstage area. Entrances onto a thrust are most readily made from backstage, although some theatres provide for performers to enter through the audience using vomitory entrances. An arena, exposed on all sides to the audience, is without a backstage and relies entirely on entrances in the 25 house or from under the stage.

30 As with an arena, the audience in a thrust stage theatre may view the stage from three or more sides. If a performance employs the fourth wall, that imaginary wall must be maintained on multiple sides. Because the audience can view the performance from a variety of perspectives, it is usual for the blocking, props and scenery to receive thorough consideration to ensure that no perspective is blocked from view. A high backed chair, for instance, when placed stage-right, could create a blind spot in the stage left action.

35 Created and found stages: A stage can also be improvised where ever a
suitable space can be found. Examples may include staging a performance
in a non traditional space such as a basement of a building, a side of a hill
or, in the case of a busking troupe, the street. In a similar manner, a
makeshift stage can be created by modifying an environment. For example
40 demarcating the boundaries of a stage in an open space by laying a
carpet and arranging seating before it.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stage_\(theatre\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stage_(theatre))

Reading comprehension and vocabulary exercises

A. Find words in the text that mean the following.

1. closeness, familiarity _____
2. not easily noticed _____
3. to keep _____
4. to mark off the boundaries of _____
5. appropriate _____

B. Discuss the following questions. Numbers in brackets refer to lines in the text.

1. *obscure* (6) means that the actors may be: (a) revealed, (b) blocked from view, (c) easily noticed.
2. *blocking, props and scenery* (30). What do these refer to?
3. *a blind spot* (32) refers to an area that: (a) can be illuminated, (b) cannot be seen, (c) can be unveiled.
4. *a busking troupe* (37) performs in: (a) private venues, (b) small rooms, (c) public places.
5. *a makeshift stage* (38) is made for: (a) temporary, (b) permanent, (c) eternal use.

C. Read texts 1 and 2 again carefully and complete the following sentences:

1. The most prominent feature of the proscenium arch theatre is _____

2. The apron refers to the extension

3. Busking may include acrobatics, singing, dancing, puppeteering, fire eating,

4. In theatre-in-the-round the audience surrounds

5. In proscenium arch theatres, the impression is that the audience is watching the production through

D. Match the terms in column A with the definitions in column B.

Column A

Column B

1. raked stage

a. the technical aspects of theatrical, film, and video production.

2. orchestra pit

b. the positioning of actors on stage.

3. stagecraft

c. a lowered area in front of a stage.

4. vomitory

d. a sloping stage which is raised at the back end.

5. blocking

e. an opening that connects an outside entrance to a tier of seats

6. tabs

f. any stage curtains.

Answers: 1. _____, 2. _____, 3. _____, 4. _____, 5. _____, 6. _____.

E. Circle the most appropriate answer.

1. Performance areas or performance spaces are also called _____

a. views

b. ventures

c. venues

d. venous

2. The _____ is the frame surrounding the front of the stage.

a. scene

b. framework

c. wing

d. arch

3. The proscenium stage is also known as a _____ frame stage.
 a. paint b. picture c. painting d. screen
4. In a(n) _____ stage the audience surrounds the stage on three sides.
 a. end-on b. open c. thrust d. arch
5. In a(n) _____ theatre, the acting space is directly between two parallel groups of audience.
 a. promenade b. apron stage c. block d. traverse
6. The area for the audience, generally filled with seats, is called _____.
 a. stage b. auditorium c. box d. aisle
7. The fourth wall is the imaginary invisible wall in the front of the stage in a(n) _____ theatre.
 a. traverse b. proscenium c. end-on d. corridor
8. Small areas of raised staging.
 a. chairs b. wings c. rostra d. flats
9. The sides of the stage are called the _____.
 a. chairs b. wings c. rostra d. flats
10. Short curtains across the top of the stage that hide the backdrops are called
 a. pincers b. beavers c. teasers d. geezers
11. In proscenium arch theatres drapes or side flats are used to blank off the _____.
 a. rostra b. wings c. walls d. ceiling
12. The term _____ refers to a tilt in the floor of the stage, usually from US to DS.
 a. rake b. trap c. gangway
13. The _____ are the seats on the main level of a theatre.
 a. aisles b. stalls c. wings

14. Amphitheatres are appropriate for _____ productions.
a. large-scale b. small-scale

15. The fourth wall is part of the _____ between a fictional work and an audience.

- a. suspension of belief b. suspension of disbelief
c. suspicion of disbelief d. suspicion of belief

F. Complete the following sentences by choosing one of the phrases given below.

1. The fourth wall is the ____

- a. imaginary invisible wall in the front of the stage in a proscenium arch theatre.
b. wall in the front of the stage in a proscenium arch theatre that blocks the view from the audience.
c. wall in the back of the stage in a proscenium arch theatre that functions as a backdrop to the action.

2. Suspension of disbelief implies our willingness to ____

- a. accept a fiction as reality
b. acknowledge lack of reality in fiction
c. disapprove of the illusion of reality created by fiction

3. Breaking the fourth wall refers to ____

- a. a character indirectly addressing the audience.
b. the audience accepting the illusion that the action is real.
c. a character directly addressing the audience and actively acknowledging that the action is not real

4. A thrust stage is like ____

- a. an extended apron stage.
b. a foreshortened apron stage.
c. a narrowed apron stage.

5. A thrust stage ____

- a. juts out into the audience that surrounds it on four sides.
b. juts out into the audience that surrounds it on three sides.
c. extends forward in front of the auditorium.

6. In a proscenium arch stage the stage can be looked upon like a _____
- a. box set
 - b. promenade area
 - c. picture frame

Text 3

Environmental theatre and site specific performance

These two forms aim explicitly to alter the conventional spatial practices of performance to enhance both the relationship between performers and audience and the performance's engagement with its space and site of production. The term 'environmental theatre' was popularized in the
5 early 1970s through the writings of Richard Schechner, works made by his company The Performance Group, and the practices of other innovative makers such as Jerzy Grotowski. Schechner intended to include a broad range of theatre practices in this term, including theatre made in found spaces. In practice, however, The Performance Group concentrated on
10 making work in their studio, which they altered radically for each performance. These physical alterations focused on producing for each show a specially constructed scenography that would provoke performers and audiences to interact, through both looking and contact. Productions such as *Dionysus in 69* (1968-69) avoided end-on perspectives, put
15 audiences closer and often in the action, encourages them to move around, and sometimes provided multiple, simultaneous focal points.

Site-specific performance shares many of these features. However, it achieved currency as a name in the 1980s and 1990s to identify
20 performance that was produced in non-theatre sites, aimed to engage directly with the meaning and history of those sites, and went out to audiences who might not normally come to the theatre. This shift in production practices reflected an increasing imperative felt by many makers to address local audiences in the face of advancing globalization. Coincidentally, the shift in name also responded to the increasing association of
25 'environmental' with ecological issues. The Welsh company Brith Gof produced devised shows in rural outdoor sites (*Tri Bywyd*, 'Three Lives', 1995) and a disused urban factory (*Gododdin*, 1988-90), provoking audiences to think about the significance of these sites in Wales's recent post-industrial economy and culture. [...] Although the term 'environmental

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theatre' and 'site-specific performance' only came into common use in the twentieth century, the spatial practices they name have a much longer Western history, from Greek amphitheatres set in spectacular environments, to medieval religious processions through towns, to Dada performance like the Cabaret Voltaire in cafés, to festivals, carnivals and protests - in all of which people occupy familiar everyday sites in unfamiliar ways. These practices also share similarities with performance art, installation art, happenings and Augusto Boal's invisible theatre, which put creative and often critical work in unusual sites in order to ask questions about those sites and the ways people behave in them.

Allain et al., 2006: 148-9.

Reading comprehension and vocabulary exercises

A. Find words in the text that mean the following.

1. to change _____
2. to stimulate, incite _____
3. characteristics _____
4. change _____
5. impressive, striking _____

B. In small groups, discuss the meaning of the following words. Give your answers in the space provided below. The symbols in brackets indicate whether the word is a verb (v), a noun (n), or an adjective (adj).

1. space (n) _____

2. spatial (adj) _____

3. spacious (adj) _____

4. site (n)

5. interact (v)

C. Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F).

1. The term *environmental theatre* is not used to describe indoor productions.
2. Site-specific performances are designed to be produced in locations other than standard theatres.
3. Conventional theatre is more interactive than site-specific theatre.
4. The term *site-specific theatre* is used to describe productions that break with the conventions of the purpose-built theatre.
5. The purpose of *site-performance* is to engage directly with the properties and meanings of a given site.

D. Explain the following theatre terms and expressions in your own words.

theatre space, theatre environment, spatial practices, scenography

E. Work in groups of three or four. Read the text again carefully and answer the following questions.

What is environmental theatre? What is site-specific theatre? What features do they share? How are they different? What sort of theatre and spatial practices do they include? Write your answers in the space provided below.

F. Match the terms in column A with the definitions in column B.

Column A

1. performance art

2. Dada

3. invisible theatre

4. happening

5. stage space

Column B

a. a form of theatrical performance that is enacted in a place where people would not normally expect to see one.

b. a live artistic practice differentiated from theatre.

c. the on-stage scenic area.

d. an art movement of the European avant-garde in the early 20th century.

e. a performance, event or situation meant to be considered art, usually as performance art.

Answers: 1. _____, 2. _____, 3. _____, 4. _____, 5. _____.

Language focus

1. Put in either the simple past or the present perfect form of the verbs in brackets, as appropriate.

a. Since the Italian Renaissance, the most common stage used in the West _____ (be) the proscenium stage.

b. The proskenium in Ancient Greek theatres _____ (be) the space in front of the skênê or backdrop where the actors actually _____ (play).

2. Discuss the use of the modal verbs in the following sentences.

a. In theatres-in-round, entrances and exits must be made either

- through the audience, or via closed-off walkways.
- b. In proscenium stage theatres, entrances and exits can be made more graceful.
 - c. In some cases, the stage may be temporary or adjustable.

Broader and more adventurous activities

What follows is the opening paragraph from Katherine Mansfield's short story *A Dill Pickle* (1917). The story involves a man and a woman who used to be together and they now meet accidentally at a café after a time span of six years. Read the excerpt and consider the questions that follow.

And then, after six years, she saw him again. He was seated at one of those little bamboo tables decorated with a Japanese vase of paper daffodils. There was a tall plate of fruit in front of him, and very carefully, in a way she recognized immediately as his 'special' way, he was peeling an orange.

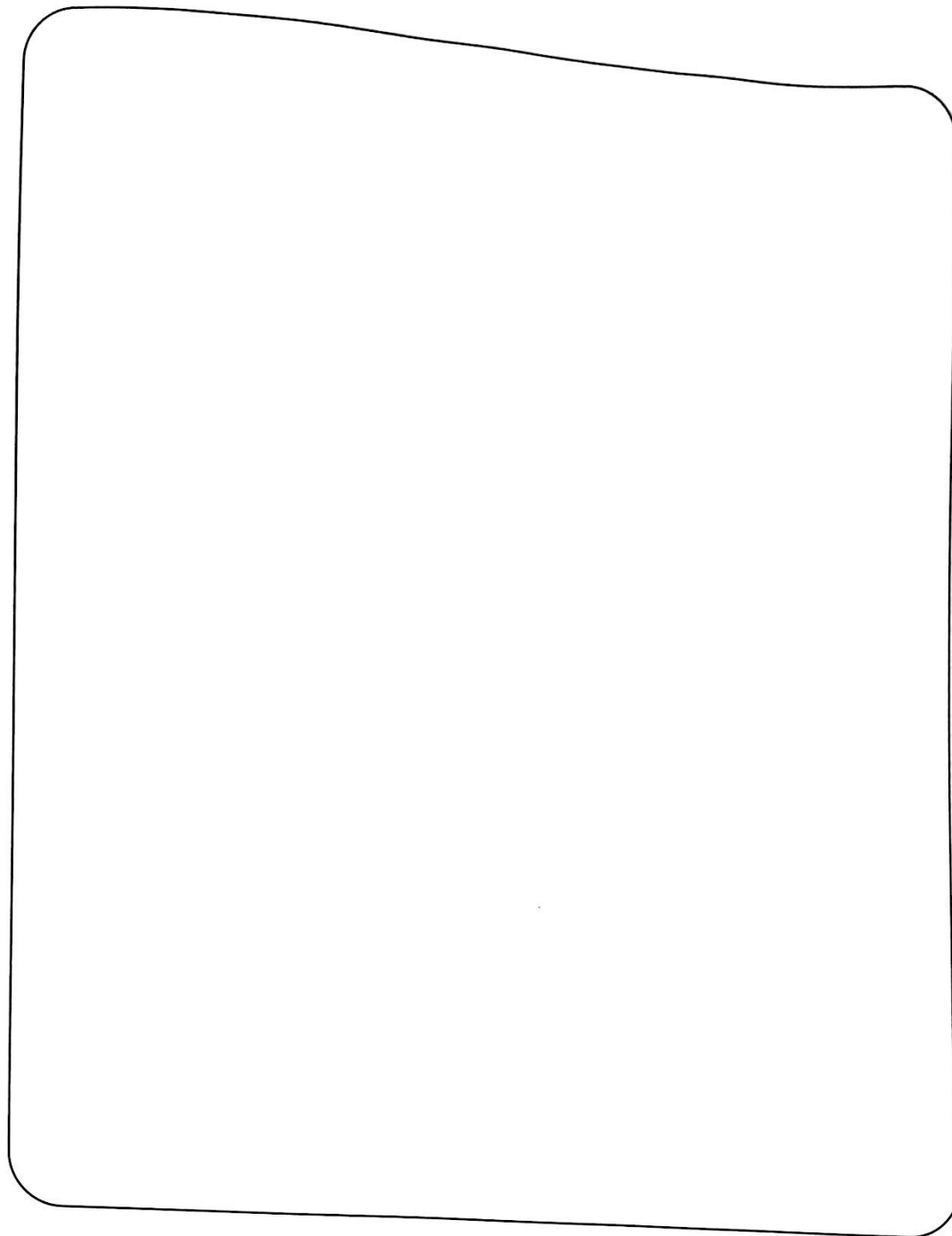
He must have felt that shock of recognition in her for he looked up and met her eyes. Incredible! He didn't know her! She smiled; he frowned. She came towards him. He closed his eyes an instant, but opening them his face lit up as though he had struck a match in a dark room. He laid down the orange and pushed back his chair, and she took her little warm hand out of her muff and gave it to him.

'Vera!' he exclaimed. 'How strange. Really, for a moment I didn't know you. Won't you sit down? You've had lunch? Won't you have some coffee?' [...]

Vocabulary

daffodil = flower with yellow flowers / frown = to have an angry look / muff = an open ended cylinder of fur or cloth in which the hands are placed for warmth

1. Devise a scenario for the next scene. What do you think happens next?
2. What happens in the end? Do they get together again, or do they part forever? Write a summary of your own version of the story in the space provided below.



3. Imagine you are the director who has been assigned the task to present a play based on your version of the story. Which type of performance space would you choose for the play in question?
- a theatre in-the-round,
 - a proscenium arch theatre,
 - a thrust stage, or
 - an improvised stage.