

Glossary of dramatic and theatrical terms

This glossary is provided for reference only and is not intended to be prescriptive.

Acting area That area within the performance space within which the actor may move in full view of the audience. Also known as the *playing area*.

Acting style A particular manner of acting which reflects cultural and historical influences.

Action The movement or development of the plot or story in a play; the sense of forward movement created by the sense of time and/or the physical and psychological motivations of characters.

Analysis In responding to dramatic art, the process of examining how the elements of drama – literary, technical, and performance – are used.

Antagonist The opponent or adversary of the hero or main character of a drama; one who opposes and actively competes with another character in a play, most often with the protagonist.

Apron The area between the front curtain and the edge of the stage.

Arena stage Type of stage without a frame or arch separating the stage from the auditorium, in which the audience surrounds the stage area. See also **Theatre-in-the-round**.

Articulation The clarity or distinction of speech.

Aside Lines spoken by an actor to the audience and not supposed to be overheard by other characters on stage.

Back projection A method of projecting images onto a translucent screen from behind. Often used for projected scenery or special effects. Because the projector is usually close to the screen, special lenses are needed to ensure that the image seen by the audience is large enough.

Backdrop A flat surface the width of the stage, hung upstage of the acting area, upon which scenery is usually painted.

Backlight Light coming from upstage, behind scenery or actors, to sculpt and separate them from the background.

Barn doors A rotatable attachment consisting of two or four metal flaps (hinged) which is fixed to the front of a **Fresnel spotlight** to cut off the beam in a particular direction(s).

Battens Compartmentalised floodlights set up so as to allow colour mixing. See also

Groundrow. Low voltage battens are commonly used as light curtains and for colour washes. Known in the US as a *striplight*.

Bifocal spot Profile lantern with two sets of shutters, one of which produces a hard edge, and one a soft edge.

Black box A one-room theatre, without a proscenium arch; interior is painted black, including walls, floor, and ceiling, and any drapes are also black.

Blackout A lighting cue where all stage lights go off simultaneously.

Blocking The path formed by the actor's movement on stage, usually determined by the director with assistance from the actor, and often written down in a script using commonly accepted theatrical symbols. See also **Staging**.

Box set A set with three walls and a ceiling, leaving the fourth wall to be imagined by the actors. The box set represents a real room with doors and windows that work.

Business A piece of unscripted or improvised action, often comic in intention, used to establish a character, fill a pause in dialogue, or to establish a scene. An author may simply suggest 'business' to indicate the need for some action at that point in the play.

Catharsis A theory advocated by Aristotle in his *Poetics* which attempts to describe the feeling of release felt by the audience at the end of a tragedy; the audience experiences catharsis, or is set free from the emotional hold of the action, after experiencing strong emotions and sharing in the protagonist's troubles.

Character A person portrayed in a drama, novel, or other artistic piece.

Characterisation How an actor uses body, voice, and thought to develop and portray a character.

Choreography The organised movement of actors and dancers to music in a play.

Chorus A group of performers who sing, dance, or recite in unison; in Greek drama, the chorus was the group of performers who sang and danced between episodes, narrated off-stage action, and commented on events.

Climax The point of greatest intensity in a series or progression of events in a play, often forming the turning point of the plot and leading to some kind of resolution.

Cloth A piece of scenic canvas, painted or plain that is flown or fixed to hang in a vertical position.

A *backcloth* (or *backdrop*) hangs at the rear of a scene.

A *floorcloth* is a painted canvas sheet placed on the stage floor to mark out the acting area, or to achieve a particular effect.

A *frontcloth* hangs well downstage, often to hide a scene change taking place

behind.

Colour filter A sheet of plastic usually composed of a coloured resin sandwiched between two clear pieces. The coloured filter absorbs all the colours of light except the colour of the filter itself, which it allows through. A colour filter is sometimes known as a 'gel', after 'gelatine', from which filters were originally made.

Colour mixing Combining the effects of two or more lighting gels.

Comedy A play that treats characters and situations in a humorous way. In Shakespeare's time, a comedy was any play with a happy ending that typically told the story of a likeable character's rise to fortune. In ancient Greece, comedies dealt almost exclusively with contemporary figures and problems. *Low comedy* is physical rather than intellectual comedy; *high comedy* is more sophisticated, emphasising verbal wit more than physical action.

Comic relief A break in the tension of a tragedy provided by a comic character, a comic episode, or even a comic line.

Concentration The actor's focus, also called *centering*; focusing on the work at hand, being in character, or being in the moment.

Conflict The internal or external struggle between opposing forces, ideas, or interests that creates dramatic tension.

Contrast Dynamic use of opposites, such as movement/stillness, sound/silence, and light/darkness.

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Cross fade Bringing another lighting state up to completely replace the current lighting state. Also applies to sound effects/music. Sometimes abbreviated to *Xfade* or *XF*.

Cyclorama A fabric drop hung from a curved or segmented batten, or a curved wall at the back of the stage, upon which light can be cast to create effects (*cyc* for short).

Dénouement The moment in a drama when the essential plot point is unravelled or explained.

Development Progression of the plot or conflict in a play.

Dialogue Spoken conversation used by two or more characters to express thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Downlight A light from directly above the acting area.

Dynamic The energetic range of, or variations within, physical movement or the difference between levels of sound.

End on Traditional audience seating layout where the audience is looking at the stage from the same direction. This seating layout is that of a proscenium arch theatre. See also **Theatre-in-the-round, Thrust, Traverse**.

Ensemble The dynamic interaction and harmonious blending of the efforts of the many artists involved in the dramatic activity of theatrical production.

Exposition The part of a play that introduces the theme, chief characters, and current circumstances.

Farce An extreme form of comedy that depends on quick tempo and flawless timing and is characterised by improbable events and far-fetched coincidences; from the French meaning 'to stuff'.

Flashback In a non-linear plot, to go back in time to a previous event; a *flash forward* would move the action into the future.

Flat A wooden frame, usually covered with painted cloth, used to create walls or separations on stage.

Flood To wash the stage with general lighting. The name given to a basic box-shaped lantern with a simple reflector used to achieve this effect.

Focus In lighting, the adjustment of the size and shape of a stage light and/or the direction in which it is aimed. In acting, the act of concentrating or staying in character.

Fourth wall The invisible wall of a set through which the audience sees the action of the play.

Fresnel spotlight Adjustable spotlight giving a diffused light, created by the construction of its lens of 'concentric circles'. Used with **Barn doors**.

Genre A category of literary or dramatic composition; drama is a literary genre. Drama is further divided into tragedy, comedy, farce, and melodrama, and these genres, in turn, can be subdivided.

Gesture Any movement of the actor's head, shoulder, arm, hand, leg, or foot to convey meaning.

Groundrow Compartmentalised floodlights set up on the stage floor so as to allow colour mixing. Commonly used to light curtains and for colour washes. See also **Batten**.

Hand props Properties such as tools, weapons, or luggage that are carried on stage by an individual actor. See also **Personal props, Props**.

House lights The lights that illuminate the auditorium before and after the performance and during intermission.

Imaging A technique which allows performers to slow down and focus individually on an issue. The performers, sitting quietly with eyes closed, allow pictures to form in their minds. These images may be motivated by bits of narration, music, sounds, smells, etc.

Improvisation The spontaneous use of movement and speech to create a character or object in a particular situation; acting done without a script.

Inflection Change in pitch or loudness of the voice.

Interaction The action or relationship among two or more characters.

Irony An implied discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. There are several forms of irony. *Verbal irony* is when a writer or speaker says one thing and means something else (often the opposite of what is said). When the audience perceives something that a character does not know, that is *dramatic irony*. *Situational irony* can be described as a discrepancy between expected results and the actual results.

Isolation Control of isolated body parts; the ability to control or move one part of the body independently of the rest.

Kinesthetic Resulting from the sensation of bodily position, presence, or movement.

Language In drama, the particular manner of verbal expression, the diction or style of writing, or the speech or phrasing that suggests a class or profession or type of character.

Lantern The generic term for a stage spotlight.

Light set A term used to describe a situation where no physical set is used on stage. The 'set' is created entirely by means of lighting.

Mannerism A peculiarity of speech or behaviour.

Melodrama A style of play, which originated in the 19th century, relying heavily on sensationalism and sentimentality. Melodramas tend to feature action more than motivation, stock characters, and a strict view of morality in which good triumphs over evil.

Mime Acting without words.

Mirroring Copying the movement and/or expression or look of someone else exactly.

Monologue A long speech made by one actor; a monologue may be delivered alone or in the presence of others.

Mood The tone or feeling of the play, often engendered by the music, setting, or lighting.

Motivation The reason or reasons for a character's behaviour; an incentive or inducement for further action for a character.

Movement Stage blocking or the movements of the actors onstage during performance; also refers to the action of the play as it moves from event to event.

Naturalism A style of drama that developed in the late 19th century as an attempt to represent real life on stage faithfully and without artifice; the actions of characters tend to be dominated by determinism (societal or environmental forces).

Pace Rate of movement or speed of action.

Parody A mocking or satirical imitation of a literary or dramatic work.

Performance elements

Includes acting (e.g. character motivation and analysis, empathy), speaking (breath control, vocal expression and inflection, projection, speaking style, diction), and non-verbal expression (gestures, body alignment, facial expression, character blocking, movement).

Personal props Small props that are usually carried in an actor's costume, such as money or a pen. See also **Hand props**, **Props**.

Pitch The particular level of a voice, instrument or tune.

Plot The events of a play or arrangement of action, as opposed to the theme. See also **Story line**.

Plot development The organisation or building of the action in a play.

Posture Physical alignment of a performer's body, or a physical stance taken by a performer which conveys information about the character being played.

Profile lantern A focusable spotlight having an ellipsoidal lens which enables a sharp-edged beam of light to be projected.

Prompt To give actors their lines as a reminder; the *prompter* is the one who assists actors in remembering their lines.

Props Short for *properties*; any article, except costume or scenery, used as part of

a dramatic production; any moveable object that appears on stage during a performance. See also **Hand props, Personal props**.

Proscenium A frame or arch separating the stage from the auditorium. The proscenium opening was of particular importance to the Realistic playwrights of the 19th century, such as Ibsen and Shaw, for whom it was a picture frame or an imaginary fourth wall through which the audience experienced the illusion of spying on characters.

Protagonist The main character or hero in a play or other literary work.

Proxemics Contemporary term for 'spatial relationships' referring to spatial signifiers of the relationship between different performers or a performer and elements of the set which convey information about character and circumstances. See also **Spatial relationships**.

Realism An attempt in theatre to represent everyday life and people as they are or appear to be through careful attention to detail in character motivation, costume, setting, and dialogue. Plays from this period (from 1820 to 1920) seek the truth, find beauty in the commonplace, and focus on the conditions of the working class. Henrik Ibsen is an exemplar of the movement; he influenced others such as George Bernard Shaw and Anton Chekov.

Resolution How the problem or conflict in a drama is solved or concluded.

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Rhythm Measured flow of words or phrases in verse forming patterns of sound. Regularity in time or space of an action, process or feature.

Ritual A prescribed form or ceremony; drama grew out of religious ritual.

Role The character portrayed by an actor in a drama.

Role playing Improvising movement and dialogue to put oneself in another's place in a particular situation, often to examine the person(s) and/or situation(s) being improvised.

Satire A play in which sarcasm, irony, and ridicule are used to expose or attack folly or pretension in society.

Scene A small section or portion of a play.

Scenery The theatrical equipment, such as curtains, flats, backdrops, or platforms, used in a dramatic production to communicate environment.

Scenography The art of creating performance environments using one or more components

including light, costume, set, space and sound.

Scrim A drop made of fabric that seems almost opaque when lit from the front but semi-transparent when lit from behind.

Set The physical surroundings, visible to the audience, in which the action of the play takes place.

Set designer The person who designs the physical surroundings in which the action of the play takes place.

Setting When and where the action of a play takes place.

Sightlines Imaginary lines of sight that determine what areas of the stage are visible to the audience from any given seat in the house.

Soliloquy A speech in which an actor, usually alone on stage, speaks the inner thoughts of his/her character aloud.

Sound The effects an audience hears during a performance to communicate character, context, or environment.

Sound design The three categories of sound design are:

- *Functional* – e.g. practical sounds such as a gunshot to coincide with an action on stage
- *Atmospheric* – i.e. the possibility of using underscoring that may include music but which may also be in the form of a soundscape
- *Incidental* – where sound can be used to cover moments of transition (e.g. between scenes or to cover the placing of stage props).

Sound effects Recorded – often abbreviated to *FX*. There are many sources for recorded sound effects, from compact discs to downloading from the internet. May form an obvious part of the action (train arriving at station) or may be in the background throughout a scene (e.g. birds chirping).

Live – gunshots, door slams, and offstage voices (amongst many others) are most effective when done live.

Sound elements Music, sound effects, actors' voices.

Space A defined area.

Spatial relationships (or spatial awareness). Traditional term for what is currently referred to as **proxemics**, referring to spatial signifiers of the relationship between different performers or a performer and elements of the set which convey information about character and circumstances.

Special effects Visual or sound effects used to enhance a theatrical performance.

Stage presence The level of comfort, commitment, and energy an actor appears to have on stage.

Staging Another term for **blocking**; deliberate choices about where the actors stand and how they move on stage to communicate character relationships and plot and to create interesting stage pictures.

Stock characters Characters who represent particular personality types or characteristics of human behaviour. Stock characters are immediately recognisable and appear throughout the history of theatre, beginning with Greek and Roman comedy and elaborated upon in *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Story line The **plot** or plan of action.

Structure The arrangement of and relationship between the constituent parts of a whole as in 'prologue, **exposition**, **dénouement**' or scenes and acts within a play.

Stylisation The shaping of dramatic material, settings, or costumes in a deliberately nonrealistic manner.

Suspense A feeling of uncertainty as to the outcome, used to build interest and excitement on the part of the audience.

Symbolism The use of symbolic language, imagery, or colour to evoke emotions or ideas.

Tableau A technique in creative drama in which actors create a frozen picture, as if the action were paused; plural is *tableaux*. Not to be confused with *freeze frame*, which is a term used in film and video production and which should not be used when discussing drama.

Tempo Relative speed or rate of movement in pace over time, e.g. the speed at which the music for a dance should be played. Can be applied to dramatic contexts such as in 'tempo rhythm'.

Tension The atmosphere created by unresolved, disquieting, or inharmonious situations that human beings feel compelled to address; the state of anxiety the audience feels because of a threat to a character in a play.

Text The basis of dramatic activity and performance; a written script or an agreed-upon structure and content for an improvisation.

Theatre games Improvisational exercises structured by the director or teacher to achieve a specific objective, such as breaking down inhibitions or establishing trust.

Theatre-in-the-round An acting area or stage that may be viewed from all sides simultaneously. See also **End on**, **Thrust**, **Traverse**.

Theme The basic idea of a play; the idea, point of view, or perception that binds together a work of art.

Thrust A stage that extends into the audience area, with seats on three sides of a peninsula-shaped acting space. See also **End on, Theatre-in-the-round, Traverse**.

Timbre The distinctive character or quality of a musical or vocal sound apart from its pitch or intensity such as in a nasal voice quality.

Timing Includes setting cues for effects and lighting, synchronising two or more things that must happen simultaneously, and establishing the pace at which lines will be delivered or the play performed.

Transition Movement, passage or change from one act, scene, section, position, state, concept, etc., to another

Traverse Form of staging where the audience is on either side of the acting area. See also **End on, Theatre-in-the-round, Thrust**.

Turning point The climax or high point of a story, when events can go either way.

Upstage (verb) To deliberately draw the audience's attention away from another actor or actors by overacting, using flashy bits of business, or other means. The term originated from an actor purposefully positioning himself upstage of the other actors so that they must turn their backs on the audience to deliver their lines to him.

Vocal expression How an actor uses his or her voice to convey character.

Vocal projection Directing the voice out of the body to be heard clearly at a distance.

Voice The combination of vocal qualities an actor uses such as articulation, phrasing, and pronunciation.

Wings Offstage areas to the right and left of the acting/onstage area.