THA 109: BEGINNING THEATRE DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY

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COURSE OUTLINE

STEP 1

WKS 1-4: An Overview of Theatre/ Theatre Design

WKS 5-7: The Nature, The Forms of Theatre and The Goal of Theatre Design.

WKS 8-11: The Historical Background of Theatre Design and Property Design in Theatre.

WKS 12-13: Revision/ Examination

COURSE EXPECTATION

The Course THA 111, Beginning theatre design and Technology Centre's on Theatre, Theatre Design, and Properties in theatre. At the end of this course, students are expected to be knowledgeable in the art of Theatre design, Stage and scene enhancement, and property construction and application in play production. This will be evaluated through a practical assessment. This assessment will take two forms, a personal assignment of Props construction by each student and a general class project. The students will be required to construct a Throne as a general class project for this course. This will form part of the fulfillment for the continuous assessment of this course.

THEATRE: AN OVERVIEW

Theatre is a building or space in which a performance may be given before an audience. The word is from the Greek *theatron*, "a place of seeing." A theatre usually has a stage area where the performance itself takes place. Since ancient times the evolving design of theatres has been determined largely by the spectators' physical requirements for seeing and hearing the performers and by the changing nature of the activity presented. In situations where there is profound distrust, fear and anger, theatre is a useful medium to bring people together to share stories and trigger emotional responses. The model of using participatory (Community theatre) methods to explore a group's main concern and then creating a play in order to debate the issues could be used in many situations. Theatre is a liberating and a unifying experience as well as being fun. Follow-up is essential, however in order to turn the community's reflection into action. (Cited in Oghenevize, I2008). Theatre could be better explained rather than defined. It could be regarded as a building or arena for the performance of plays for dramatic purposes. It is the proper place for drama. But theatre is not just confined to one place or arena. It is also out there in the streets, and market places. Umukoro Oghenevize perceives the theatre as " an art form that seek to represent life experience on stage, it seeks the meaning of existence with the intent to inspire man to reflect on life itself. (2008:4).The people's theatre is found around them where they live, where they work, where they play. Theatre is everywhere! For the world is the laboratory of the theatre.

Solomon Ejeke submits that, "theatre is a social art that performs the triple functions of education, elucidation and entertainment." In accordance, Bakary Traore sees drama as an art, which draws men together. It is a cohesive force that makes men conscious of themselves and

one another. It enhances the life of men, providing entertainment and invoking a sense of order. Drama expresses the feelings, emotions and experiences of man in society. Theatre is the most direct of all artistic forms. It confronts living beings with other living beings and in this immediate correspondence between its practitioners and its recipient's lies superiority over all other art forms (Osanyin 1).

Theatre confronts the public with the day-to-day activities of man. Ejeke asserts thus in *Culture and the Business of Theatre in Nigeria* that, the theatre selects important experience from our daily lives and confronts man with them. He quotes Bowskill's definition of drama as

> the imaginative communication of significant experience. It may make us laugh, cry, think, or indeed, all three at the same time. Above all, it sets out to make us respond and, by practice, to become more responsive in general. (Cited in Ejeke, 2011)

Though an art form, it is a strong social pillar. Ill-informed about the nature and purpose of theatre, many people think that it deals with mere trivialities and fun. However, this is wrong, for as Oyin Ogunba rightly observes, Two often one is tempted to think that is a matter of laughter and uproarious jest, whereas it is a medium admirably suited for making deep, psychological probes into the consciousness of a community (Cited in Ejeke, 2011). The theatre in a broader sense encompass diverse aspects of the human life, In a bid to achieve its multipurpose function of the 3E's, The theatre better informs and instruct alongside its systematic dramatization of events that rein forms the average individual of the happenings around him.

THEATRE DESIGN (AN OVERVIEW)

Theatre design, the art and technique of designing and building a space—a theatre—intended primarily for the performance of drama and its allied arts by live performers who are physically present in front of a live audience

This article describes the different forms a theatre can take and the history of those forms. In doing so, it will use two terms—*theatre design* and *theatre architecture*—largely interchangeably. Both are intended to describe a discipline that creates and shapes the space known, broadly, as a theatre. This article ranges widely across a variety of subjects, including the art known as theatre and the building type known as a theatre. For other related subjects, *see* stagecraft, theatrical production, stage machinery, dramatic literature, and the history of Western theatre, among others.

NATURE OF THEATRE DESIGN

As an art form, theatre does not require a purposefully designed building in which to be presented. But when audiences gather regularly to experience a performance, attempts are generally made to organize the space in order to improve on the nature of the experience the audience can have, and this is the beginning of theatre design. The simplest theatres are cleared areas of ground around which people can stand or sit to view a performance. Theatre design, however, is concerned with elaborating such space—first, to provide the optimum conditions for the audience to experience a theatre performance and, second, to aid the performers in achieving the fullest expression of their art.

The practice of theatre design can encompass open-air spaces or spaces that are fully enclosed. It can involve a temporary structure put up only on certain occasions or a complete stand-alone permanent building. It can include purpose-built areas within larger complexes or the modification of buildings originally built for other purposes. Because they are well designed for the gathering of a group of people and generally allow for controlled access, theatres tend to be used as multipurpose buildings that can provide assembly space for lectures, meetings, concerts, films, performance art, circuses, and even certain types of sporting events. But at its most basic

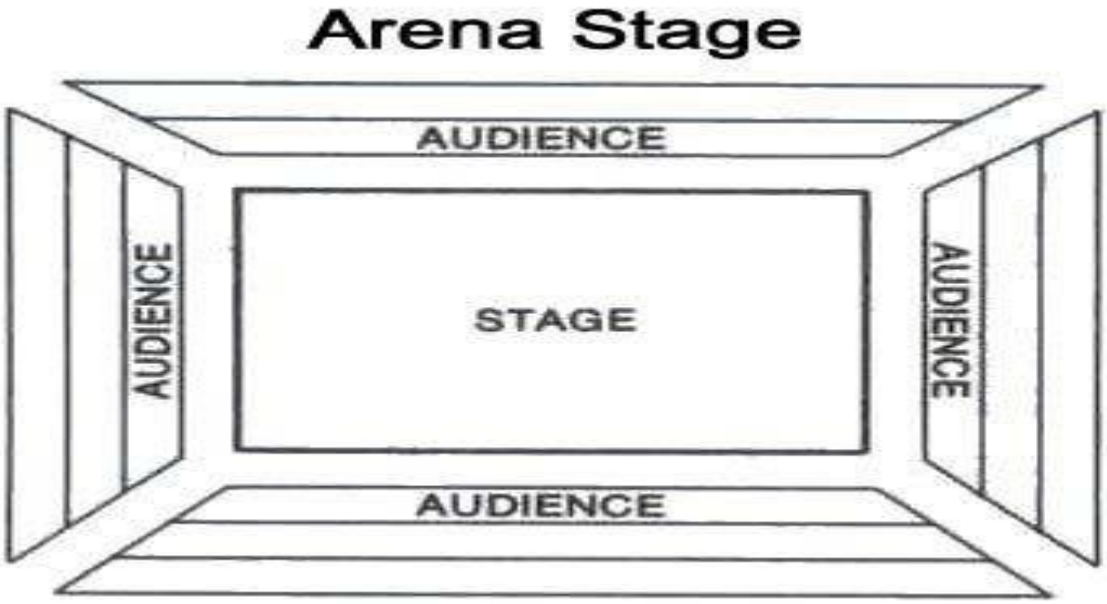
level, a theatre provides a space for the performers to enact their performance and a space for the audience to experience that enactment. The space used for performance is most often referred to by the word *stage* in English. The space occupied by the audience is referred to by a variety of terms, of which *auditorium* (literally, "hearing place") may be the most common. *House* is the most generic term used to refer to the audience's space, in that it focuses attention on the experience that can be had by the audience without favouring any one aspect of that experience.

FORMS OF THEATRE

Every theatre is unique, but, with few exceptions, theatres, both Western and Asian, can be categorized into four basic forms: arena stage theatres (also referred to as theatre-in-the-round); thrust stage (or open stage) theatres; end stage theatres (of which proscenium theatres are a subset); and flexible stage theatres, also sometimes called black box theatres. The design of all these types is based on the relationship the space establishes between the stage and the house.

ARENA THEATRES: Arena theatres are those that have an audience around four sides of the stage. These are often called Amphitheatre's, island stage theatres, or centre stage theatres, or they are referred to generally as theatre-in-the-round (although the stages can be round, oval, octagonal, square, rectangular, or in a variety of irregular shapes). Arena stages are thought to create a strong sense of community among the audience members and an easy flow of energy between the audience and the actors. They do, however, put major restrictions on the amount and kind of visual spectacle that can be provided for a performance, because scenery more than a few feet tall will block the views the audience members have of the action taking place onstage. In these theatres, scene-changing equipment must be limited primarily to that which can be put under the stage, and special effects are difficult to manage because so little can be hidden from

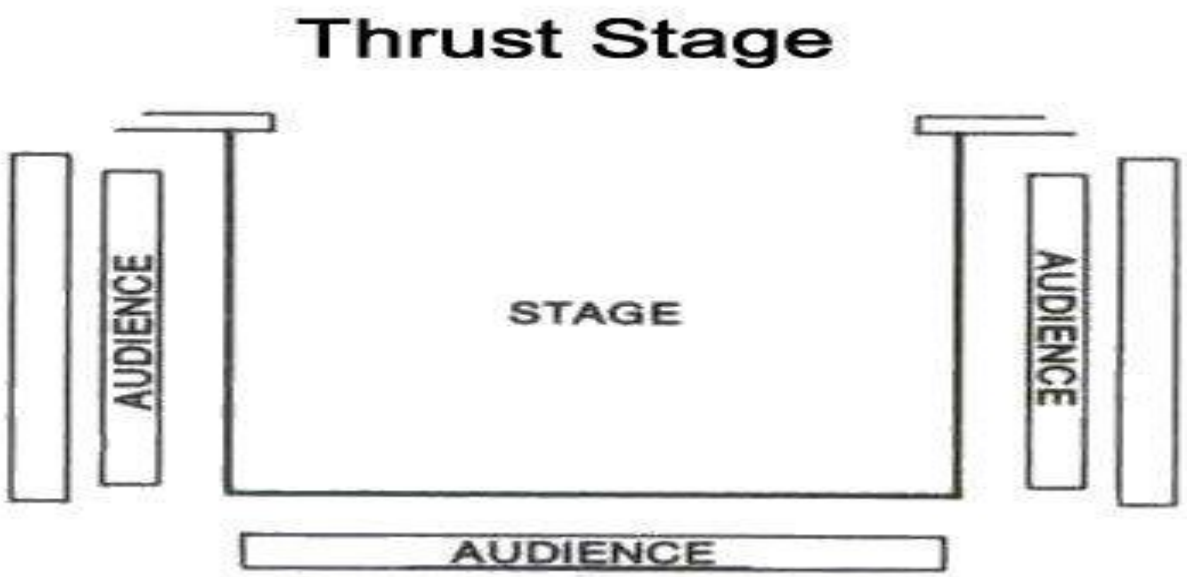
the audience. Arena theatres also complicate the management of the movement pattern for actors (the “blocking”), as they must perform to all sides of the stage without having their backs to any one side for too long a time and without preventing one part of the audience from seeing other actors.



Interior of the original Richardier Stage. Photo courtesy of Arena Stage.

THRUST STAGE: Thrust stage theatres are those in which the stage thrusts out from one side of the space into the midst of the audience. They are also known as open stage theatres and sometimes as courtyard theatres. The audience is most often located around three sides of a thrust stage, though they can be located on two sides opposite each other (as they are in alley stage or transverse stage theatres, sometimes called centre stage theatres) or on two adjoining sides (as they are in L-shaped theatres). Thrust stages are most commonly trapezoidal, semicircular, rectangular, or square. In both arena and thrust stage theatres, some members of the audience will be looking at other members of the audience across the stage, where they will appear as the background to the performance. Thrust stage theatres are therefore thought to share many of the community-building advantages of arena stages. They also make managing the movement patterns of the actors and displaying and changing the scenery less difficult because there is always at least one side of the stage that is not occupied by the audience. Often, arena

theatres are designed for easy conversion into thrust stage theatres by way of the removal of one section of audience seating.

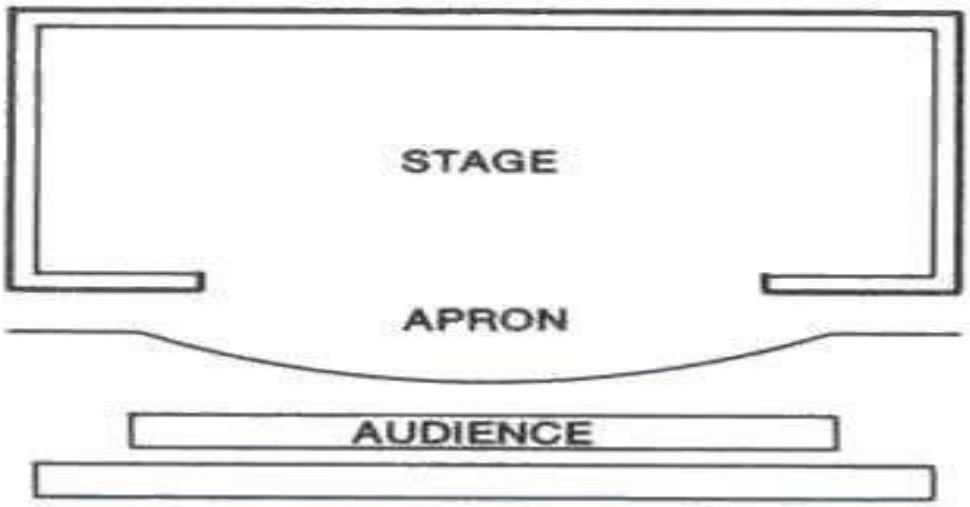


END STAGE: End stage theatres are those that have an audience on only one side. Such stages are most often rectangular or square, but they can be triangular (in which case they are called corner stage theatres) or take a variety of irregular shapes that can include side stages (in which case they are referred to as extended stage theatres). End stages are thought to focus the full attention of the audience onto the production. End stages also simplify blocking, allowing actors' movement patterns to be more easily composed into aesthetically appropriate shapes, and they greatly simplify the display of scenery and special effects. The house of an end stage theatre can be rectangular or take the shape of a fan, leaving all members of the audience facing the same direction. But the house can also be shaped like a bell or a horseshoe or can be semicircular or square and arranged so that some members of the audience can still look across the space at other members of the audience. The significant difference between this form and the arena or thrust stage forms, however, is that in end stages almost all members of the audience must look away from the stage to see their fellow audience members. They therefore do not appear as a background to the performance. For this reason end stage theatres are thought to be less conducive than the other forms to building a sense of community within an audience. End stage theatres may have movable ceiling and walls that can be adjusted to increase or decrease the seating capacity in the house. Some thrust stage theatres can be used as end stage theatres by blocking off the audience's space on all but one side.

All of the theatre forms discussed so far put the actors and the audience within the same volume of space. But there is one variety of end stage theatre that intentionally puts the stage in a separate volume of space from that occupied by the house: the proscenium, or "Italian style,"

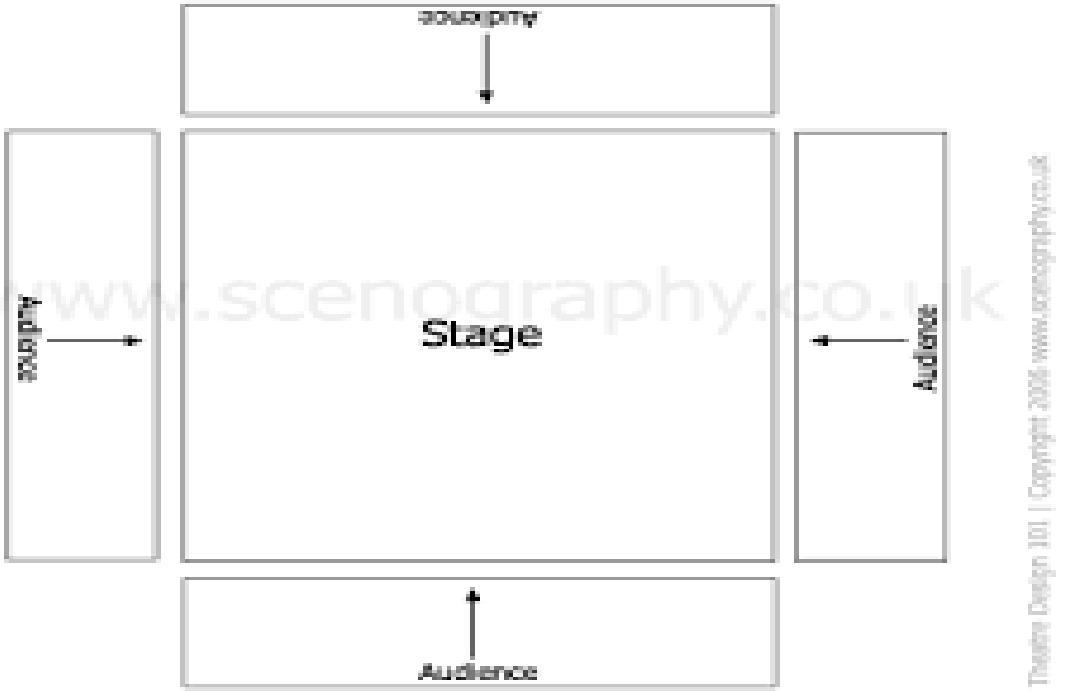
theatre. In this form, the stage is separated from the house by a wall with a large arched opening (the proscenium, which can sometimes be rectangular or square) that allows the audience to see through from the house to the stage as if looking through a frame at a large moving picture. Because of this unique feature, the proscenium theatre is often given its own classification. But throughout much of the form's history, proscenium stages have been fitted with "aprons" or "fore-stages" that carry the stage through the arch into the house and thus make it a variation on the end stage form. Traditionally, actors did most of their performing on the apron, which left the part of the stage behind the arch to be used primarily for scenery and scene-changing equipment. "Calipers," which are side stages that extend from the main stage through the arch to locations at the right and the left front of the house, have also been used to allow the actors to perform in the same volume of space as that occupied by the audience, at least for small portions of the performance. The proscenium arch theatre was developed in Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries to facilitate the Renaissance's fascination with perspective and its interest in moving pictures. The form's greatest advantage continues to be that it allows for the maximum amount of spectacle in performance. The trade-off is that actors must work harder to project their energy from the stage into the house than they do in other theatre forms, because proscenium theatres, especially those without apron stages, tend to make the audience observers of the drama rather than people who experience the drama taking place in their midst. In cultures where observation is considered an appropriate aesthetic quality for theatre, proscenium theatres proliferate; in

those where audiences expect to share more of the experience of the drama, they are less popular.



Flexible stage theatres are those that do not establish a fixed relationship between the stage and the house. Also known as black box theatres, laboratory theatres, modular theatres, multiform theatres, free form theatres, or environmental theatres, they can be reconfigured for each

performance. They can be put into any of the standard theatre forms or any of the variations of those. They can be made into “surround theatres” (which are sometimes called “total theatres” or “theatre-all-around”), in which the audience sits or stands in the centre and the stage surrounds it on four sides. They can also be made into “promenade” spaces in which the audience follows the actors around to different locations within the space.



THE GOAL OF THEATRE DESIGN

Theatre design is primarily concerned with enhancing the experience the audience can have at a performance. The specific architectural elements considered ideal for improving that experience will differ from culture to culture and sometimes even between subcultures within a given culture, but they can still be divided into two general categories: those that serve the aesthetics deemed appropriate for the art of theatre in a given culture, and those that optimize the experience of that art for the audience. Those elements that serve the aesthetics of the art of theatre can involve everything from what the performers need to reach the artistic standards deemed proper before a performance starts to what they need to support the required amount of spectacle during performance, whether it be a bare stage or a stage with enormous movable sets and a spectacular array of props.

The elements that are most often discussed in terms of optimizing the experience had by the audience, by contrast, revolve around audience comfort. It must be recognized, however, that not all designers of theatres see comfort as a prime value. It is often thought that some discomfort assists in keeping audience energy high. It is also true that comfort is a relative term. In one culture it might mean a mud-free surface on which to stand; in another it might suggest large soft seats with much legroom and precise temperature control. Comfort in a theatre also has both physical and social components. Physical comfort involves the nature of the seating or standing area, the amount of space allotted to each audience member, and the ease of access to the space. Physical comfort also includes the ability of all audience members to see and hear a performance in the manner that their culture has taught them is most desirable for the proper

experience of theatre. It also includes the maintenance of a certain level of safety. Social comfort, on the other hand, has to do with each audience member's ability to feel like part of a group at a theatre event. Among the factors that are generally considered when it comes to social comfort is whether the arrangement of the audience within the house reflects the accepted social order within the culture. Theatre audiences have been organized by class, caste, gender, and occupation as well as by combinations of these and many other factors, depending on the emphasis put on such divisions within a culture. While it is often argued that such architectural organization involves the segregation of those who are judged to be somehow less desirable, it is also true that it keeps audience members within the social groups with which they feel the most comfortable. The location of the theatre within a town or city is also a factor in social comfort, as the expected audience must feel that it is proper for them to be in the area. The level of decoration of the theatre can also be a factor in social comfort, as it can make the audience feel that the art being presented is above or beneath their social level.

The precise nature of each architectural element and the exact combination of elements found in any given theatre will be determined by the ability of a theatre's architect to understand and give expression to what the culture or subculture believes to be ideal. Whatever the abilities of the architect, however, that expression of the ideal will always be compromised by the availability of resources. In order to conserve resources, some elements will be left out while others will be provided at less than an optimum level. Matters of comfort, however that term might be defined, will be applied to only as many members of the audience as is practical rather than to all of the members equally.

THE STAGE AND BACK STAGE

Those elements of the design of a theatre that serve primarily the aesthetics of theatre performance are the stage and the stage support facilities, often referred to as backstage spaces (though the spaces will not necessarily be behind the stage or even in the same building as the stage). A stage, regardless of the form of the theatre, can be a cleared space on the ground or a simple raised platform. But a stage can also be a remarkably complex machine with areas for scene-changing equipment, such as wing space (at the sides of a stage), trap rooms (below a stage), fly spaces (above a stage), and rear stages (at the back of the stage), all of which also allow for multiple entrances and exits for the actors. A stage can contain revolves (turntables) and tracks for the movement of scenery and actors, and it can provide a variety of crossover spaces that allow the actors to exit the stage at one point and enter it at another. It can also be built on multiple levels. Backstage spaces can include dressing rooms, green rooms (actors' lounges), and rehearsal rooms. They can also include production services such as design studios; shops for building costumes, scenery, and stage properties; paint shops; electric shops; wig shops; hat shops; laundry facilities; storage areas; loading docks; and stage door security stations. Finally, they can include areas within the house, from positions for the hanging of lighting equipment and speaker systems to control rooms for stage lighting, sound, and special effects. A space for musicians to play music before, during, and after a performance is also part of the stage-support facilities in most theatres. While this space can be located among the backstage areas, it is more often onstage or in the house near the stage.

THE HOUSE AND FRONT OF HOUSE

Those elements of a theatre's design that serve primarily to optimize the experience of the audience are the house and the audience support facilities, which are generally referred to as

"front-of-house" facilities (though, as with the word *backstage*, *front of house* does not necessarily indicate an actual physical location within a theatre building). Ensuring that as many members of the audience as is practical can see the stage well seems always to have been a priority in the design of theatres. In the house, whether the theatre is an arena, a thrust, or an end stage theatre or a flexible one, the surface on which the audience sits (or stands) normally rises in elevation as it moves away from the stage so that audience members can see more easily over those in front of them. Because the ability of members of the audience to see well is also influenced by the distance they are from the stage, many theatre designs try to maximize proximity to the stage by stacking sections of the audience one above the other, either in galleries supported by posts or in balconies cantilevered out from the walls. In some historic periods, this proximity to the stage was the only architectural feature that made it possible for the audience to hear easily. In other periods, however, theatre architects focused much of their attention on the acoustical design of the house so as to ensure that as many members of the audience as possible could hear every word emanating from the stage. Audience safety has usually involved ensuring that audience members can exit a theatre quickly in the event of fire or other emergency. It has also involved efforts to make the theatre building in general, and the house specifically, as fire-resistant (and as earthquake-resistant) as possible. Indeed, part of the success of proscenium theatres has been that the stage area, where fires are most likely to start, can be sealed off from the house through the use of a fire curtain that closes the arch.

The front-of-house facilities provide for the needs of the audience before, during, and after a performance. Those needs include everything from the manner in which audience members get information about a performance to the manner in which they access transportation when the performance ends. Front-of-house facilities can include entrances and exits to the

building, lobbies, grand staircases, ticket offices, refreshment areas, gift shops, cloak rooms, and restrooms. They can also include facilities for heating, ventilation, and air conditioning and for cleaning and maintaining the structure, as well as the vast array of offices necessary for running a theatre business. A great deal of attention is paid to the decoration of the house, of those front-of-house facilities that are seen by the audience, and of the exteriors of the theatre building. Such decoration can be anything from spectacularly grand to remarkably plain. In each instance, however, the decoration reflects an architect's interpretation of what the culture or subculture assumes to be appropriately inviting to the audience and what will put the audience in the most receptive mood for the type of performance they will be experiencing in the theatre.

The location of a theatre building within a geographical area is often dictated by the availability of land or by economic factors. But when several options are available for locating a theatre, both aesthetic issues and issues associated with the audience's comfort will be taken into account. In book five of Vitruvius's *De architectura* (*c.* 15 BCE)—the oldest treatise on theatre architecture in the West—architects are admonished to take great care to select a site that will be conducive to good acoustics and will be healthy for the audience. Some cultures have required that theatres be built within a beautiful natural setting, whereas others have restricted them to certain sections of an urban or suburban environment. Still others have made theatres focal points of their urban planning.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THEATRE DESIGN

Nearly all modern theatre design can be traced back to the theatrical traditions established by the Greek-speaking peoples of the Mediterranean starting in the 6th century BCE. Records

exist concerning independent traditions in the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas before the arrival of Europeans, but too little is known about these to be able to confidently track their development or possible influence, and ambiguity exists as to the definition of “theatre” in some of these places. It seems to be true, however, that whenever theatre is introduced into a culture, spaces that already exist for the gathering of people are called into service for its display. Any ideas for theatre design that emerge with the introduction of theatre into a culture are therefore transformed as they are blended with the design of these preexisting spaces. The two oldest existing theatre buildings in India, for example, seem to have been based on Greek models, but by the time of the writing of the section (in chapter two) on theatre architecture in the Sanskrit *Natyashastra* (*c.* 100 CE; “Treatise on Dramatic Art”), Indian theatre design had developed along quite different lines. None of the Sanskrit theatres have survived, so it is nearly impossible to judge the extent of their influence on the theatres of other Asian countries, even when the influence of Indian theatre on styles of performance, costume, and makeup as well as on staging conventions in those countries seems quite clear. Many of the unique elements of Asian theatre architecture can be seen in such traditional forms as *kathakali* in India and Noh in Japan. But since the early 20th century, modern Asian theatre buildings have favoured European models.

The Greek tradition of theatre design passed to the eastern Mediterranean and to as far as northern India in the Hellenistic Age. It was taken into the western Mediterranean and central Europe during the period of the Roman Empire and was at the heart of the revival of theatre design in the Renaissance, at which time it underwent its most radical transformation into the forms that persist today. During the Renaissance, new theatre design spread throughout Europe. In the various colonial periods, it spread worldwide as cultures either adapted Western models

outright or favoured those among their own traditional forms that were most like ones in the West.

THE FIRST THEATRES

The oldest existing spaces to be classified as “theatrical areas” are in four Minoan palaces on the island of Crete. The oldest of these, at Phaestus, dates to as early as 2000 BCE, while the one at Amnisus may have been built as late as 700 BCE. These are L-shaped, open-air spaces built of stone with a rectangular stage. The house is a set of wide, low steps terminating in a blank wall on one side of the stage. A grand staircase (which leads into the palace) provides additional audience space on an adjoining side. The wide steps seem best suited for the kind of stools that are illustrated in a number of Minoan murals, while the grand staircase could easily accommodate dozens and dozens of audience members either sitting or standing. The maximum audience capacity has been estimated to be 500. Nothing is known about what was witnessed in such spaces, however, so identification of them as theatres is speculative. These spaces do share some similarities with the earliest-known theatres on mainland Greece, but there is no evidence that the Greeks knew anything about them.

Classical era: Greece and Rome

The first identification of theatre as a distinctive art form in the city-state of Athens can be dated to 534 BCE, when the first prize in a competition for tragedy was awarded. The Roman writer Horace, writing 500 years later, believed that Thespis, who won the competition, had developed theatre while traveling with a cart that he used as a stage in any open area where an audience could gather. Such portable stages were used for centuries in the performance of variety entertainments (called mimes). The 12th-century Byzantine encyclopaedia known as the *Suda* indicates that the earliest theatre in Athens was built in its market square (agora) and used temporary wooden stands (*ikria*) for seating and a cleared area of the market for a stage. This arrangement would have resembled, and may even have inspired, the oldest existing Greek theatres, which are at Árgos and Thorikos, both of which were built before 500 BCE. These were open-air end stage theatres in which the house (*theatron*, or "a place of seeing," in Greek) was a bank of straight-line seats (perhaps originally in wood but eventually in stone) supported by a hillside, while the stage (*orchēstra*, or "a place of dancing") was a roughly rectangular space at the bottom of the hill. At these sites there is today little evidence of a skene (from the Greek *skēnē*, or "scene-building"), which was the third basic component of later Greek theatres, so it is assumed that if such a structure existed, it was temporary. Greek theatres of this form continued to be built into the 3rd century BCE. Sometime before 497 BCE, the Athenians moved their theatre from the market square to a precinct dedicated to the god Dionysus on the southeast slope of the Acropolis. It is likely that it at first followed the straight-line form of the theatre in the agora, but gradually the seating benches were laid out in sections in the shape of wedges that formed a polygon around part of the northern half of the stage, giving it a thrust stage configuration. By the middle of the 5th century BCE, the stage area had taken on the shape of a U, with a polygonal house of wooden benches around just slightly more than half of the

northern loop (the lower part of the U), a straight-line scene building closing off the southern end (the top), and an empty space just below the top of the U into which the entranceways (*parodoi*) led. The scene building was substantial enough to provide a small playing space on its roof and at least one set of doors facing the stage. The doors may have led onto a porch, raised two or three steps above the orchestra so it could serve as a raised stage or "place of speaking" (*logeion*). This was certainly a feature of later Greek theatres when small buildings were actually constructed on each end of the skene to enclose the ends of such a raised stage. The performance area of Greek theatres was often divided into two sections, the main stage and a raised stage at the back. The scene building had sufficient space for the operation of complex stage machinery both for flying actors onto or off the stage and for revealing a tableau of an interior scene on a platform rolled out from within. This building also provided up to three entrances along the back of the raised stage.

It was not until 330–325 BCE, at the beginning of the Hellenistic Age, that the house in the Theatre of Dionysus was built in stone and took on a shape, slightly more than semicircular, that has so often been identified (mistakenly) with the theatre buildings of a century earlier. The semicircular house ran in tiers up the hillside, where it ended in a walkway. Beyond the walkway was a rise in elevation of several feet and another section of seating, which had been added to extend the house farther up the hill. In the largest of its many renovations, the theatre may have held an audience of over 17,000 people.

It is not clear whether the Theatre of Dionysus established this form of theatre architecture or was merely following a trend established elsewhere, but this was to become the basic model for theatres for the next 500 years. The most complete existing example of this kind of stone

structure is the theatre at Epidaurus, across the Saronikós (Saronic) Gulf from Athens. Epidaurus was a healing sanctuary in the countryside. The theatre, which could hold 12,000 to 14,000 people, is noted to this day for its almost perfect acoustics and for the circle outline that occupies the lower two-thirds of its U-shaped orchestra. But there is no evidence that plays were performed at Epidaurus, and this theatre may well have been designed for the presentation of some form of healing ceremony.

About 440 BCE, Athens became the site of the first documented indoor theatre, the Odeum of Pericles. This was a square building with seating along all four walls and a performance area in the centre. It had a seating capacity of perhaps 4,000 people, though the view of the stage of more than half the audience members would have been obstructed by columns. This was a theatre used more often for poetry recitals, music recitals, political ceremonies, and religious events than for drama. It may, however, have been used for the rehearsal of performances scheduled for the Theatre of Dionysus, which was nearby. Later odea, especially in Roman times, were laid out much like the open-air stone theatres but scaled down to fit inside a much smaller square or rectangular building that was as free as possible of column supports for the roof. These were of the end stage, rather than of the thrust stage, form. The semicircular house and the lower stage were foreshortened to a shallow shape rather than the longer U shape of the outdoor theatres, and most of the performance occurred on the raised stage (*pulpitum*) along the rear wall.

The first great theatrical construction boom came in the Hellenistic period, when the building of theatres in stone became one way in which cities competed with one another. During this time the house became increasingly ornate, but its basic design, and that of the main stage

(orchestra), changed very little. It was the raised stage (*logion*) and scene building (skene) that underwent radical change. The skene was now typically two stories high. Projecting out from its first story, at about 10 feet (3 metres) above the orchestra, was the raised stage, supported by a row of columns along its front edge (*proscenia*, from which the English word *proscenium* is derived). Decorative panels could be fixed between these columns to create a variety of backgrounds for the orchestra. Backgrounds for the raised stage were provided by the second story of the skene, which seems to have had a number of large openings that could be used as entrances, as spaces in which to reveal scenes, and perhaps even as spaces for small sets.

The Romans encountered Greek theatre design as they conquered the Greek colonies of southern Italy between 343 and 341 BCE and added Sicily in 241 BCE. The start of Roman theatre is usually dated to 240 BCE. It was in all ways based on Greek models, though it did not slavishly copy them. For reasons that are not fully understood, the Romans did not immediately build theatres in stone, as the Greeks were doing at a remarkable pace. The Romans built their theatres of wood for a specific festival; when the festival was over, the entire structure was taken down. Gradually these structures became fantastically elaborate. Pliny the Elder reports that, by about 50 BCE, wooden theatres with audience capacities of up to 80,000 were being built three stories high, with decorations made of glass, marble, and gilded lumber. Even allowing for considerable exaggeration, these theatres were extraordinary feats of engineering. Stone theatres were gradually built in cities outside Rome in the early part of the 1st century BCE, but it was not until 55 BCE that a stone theatre was finally erected in the city itself. This was the theatre of Pompey the Great, and it became the model for Roman-built open-air theatres thereafter.

The theatre of Pompey was built on flat ground, using arched substructures (something the Hellenistic Greeks used only on a small scale). These substructures allowed the audience to access several levels of corridors that ran beneath the seating and led to entranceways (*vomitoria*) that opened out into the seating area itself. The house was much like a traditional Greek theatre except that there was now a covered colonnade running around the uppermost level. This colonnade was broken at the centre by the entrance to a large temple of Venus that projected out behind the theatre. The builders of nearly all subsequent Roman theatres incorporated this upper shaded walkway into their designs, though few found it desirable to include the temple.

Designers of later Roman theatres made use of hillsides so as to reduce the cost of building substructures. But while Greek theatres laid out most of the seating directly onto a hillside, Romans terraced the hillsides and built seating on single-level substructures at each terrace level so that passageways under the seating would still be available. By far the most distinguishing characteristic of the Roman theatres, however, was the redesigned scene building that closed them off from the outside world. In Roman theatres the raised stage (*pulpitum*) was low, generally only about three feet (one metre) high. It came out almost to the centreline of the orchestra, which was commonly used for additional seating and occasionally used for everything from small-scale gladiatorial combats to water ballets. The raised stage was backed by a *scaenae frons* that was as tall as the seating area and was divided into at least three stories with a roof extending over the raised stage area from the top level. The *parodoi* that had separated the house from the scene building in Greek theatres were now covered entranceways, and the entire theatre became an unbroken D shape, much like a traditional odeum. The uniform height created by the *scaenae frons* and the covered walkway made it possible to stretch large pieces of fabric over

whatever part of the audience needed to be shaded from intense sunlight. Roman theatres were sometimes also cooled with sprays of water.

Practically every city of any size either modified its existing Greek theatre or built a new Roman one during the first two centuries of the Roman Empire. So many theatres were built that, by the start of the 3rd century CE, only the colonies of north central Africa and northern Europe lacked new theatres, and that century witnessed construction in those places. As the political stability of the Roman Empire deteriorated, theatres were gradually abandoned. In the four centuries after the collapse of the empire, they were used as stone quarries, and the remains were sometimes used as fortifications.

Middle Ages

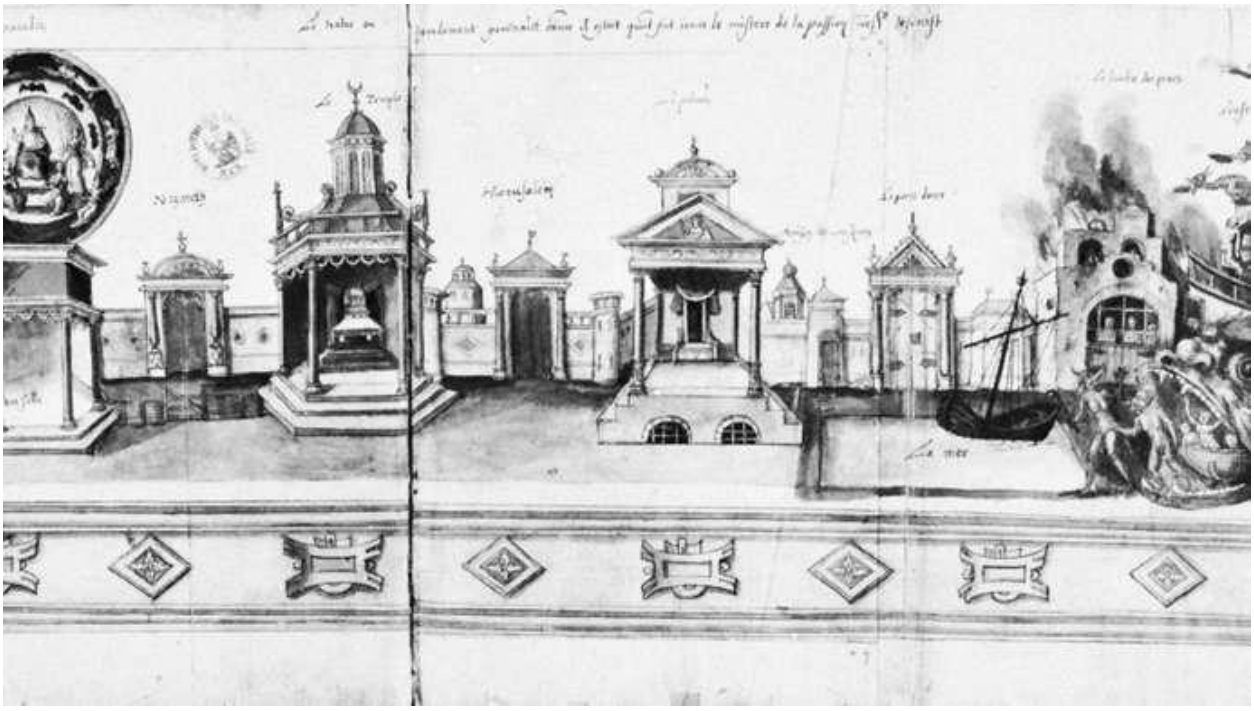
Little is known about theatre in the West from the 6th through the 10th century CE. By the end of the 12th century, it was being performed in found spaces such as village greens, churches, churchyards, halls, and the ruins of Roman Amphitheatre's. Found spaces were used much as flexible theatres are today in that they could be configured as arena theatres, as any variety of thrust stage theatre, as end stage theatres, or even as surround stage or promenade spaces. The only form that is not found in the Middle Ages is the proscenium theatre. By the late Middle Ages, temporary theatres were also being constructed in market squares, at stations along streets, and in open areas in or just outside cities. What made medieval theatre so adaptable was multiple setting (*décor simultané*), a staging technique that used localized scenic structures (mansions, or houses) and a generalized stage area. Individual mansions represented a location required for a performance, from "heaven" to "Jerusalem" to "hell." These could be arranged in any configuration, from straight lines to circles to a number of other shapes, or they could be put on

wagons and moved from one location to another. The only requirement was that the mansions face an open stage, or "place," which then took on the identity of whatever mansion was in use. When characters entered fr om the Garden of Eden mansions, for instance, the entire stage became the Garden of Eden, and all other mansions in view of the audience were ignored.

By the late Middle Ages, temporary seating areas were being constructed in market squares, at stations along streets where pageant wagons were to stop, in various kinds of halls, and in fields just outside many cities. The earliest such theatre for which any record exists is a theatre-in-the-round illustrated in a manuscript of the English morality play *The Castle of Perseverance* (*c.* 1400–25). This document appears to call for the construction of a round theatre of mounded earth, though this interpretation is disputed. Another early example comes from two illustrations by the French artist Jean Fouquet. He made miniatures called *Martyrdom of Saint Apollonia* (*c.* 1460) and *The Rape of the Sabines* (*c.* 1477). In both illustrations a number of tournament stands—which consist of small platforms supported by four posts—are arranged in a polygonal half circle around an open stage area. These platforms stand 8 to 12 feet (2.5 to 3.6 metres) above the ground. In *Martyrdom of Saint Apollonia*, the tournament stands are occupied by mansions, musicians, and what appear to be actors waiting to enter the central stage area, while the audience stands or sits below. In *The Rape of the Sabines*, both the stands and the area below them are occupied by audience. Whether these are illustrations of an actual theatre of the time or merely fanciful illustrations of the artist's conception of a Roman theatre is unknown.

The most complex architectural forms to be developed from medieval theatre were not actually built until the 16th century, when large open-air end stage theatres were built at places such as Valenciennes in France and as a type of "theatre all around" set up in market squares, such as at

Lucerne in Switzerland. But by this time there had already been an explosion of new developments in theatre design brought about by the Renaissance.



Renaissance

During the late Middle Ages, the Confrérie de la Passion in Paris, a charitable institution that had been licensed to produce religious drama in 1402, converted a hall in the Hôpital de la Trinité into a theatre. It is unclear which of the following two configurations the theatre adopted: an end stage arrangement with an audience seated around three sides of the hall and a large standing audience on the floor in front of the stage, or an arena theatre arrangement with the actors using the central floor area as their stage with the audience seated around them. This is an early example, however, of what came to be known as a "theatre in the hall" (*teatro della sala*), an arrangement that became a dominant form of theatre design in the Renaissance, when formal experimentation was being undertaken by academic institutions (academies, grammar schools,

Jesuit colleges, universities, etc.), by members of the nobility who competed with one another to put on lavish spectacles, and by entrepreneurs and charities who wished to make money by providing theatrical performances for the public.

Experimentation with the forms of academic theatres began with the work of Julius Pomponius Laetus, founder of the Roman Academy, who had received one of the first printed copies of Vitruvius's *De architectura* in 1486 and immediately set out to discover the nature of the original staging of Roman plays. His work focused on the design and usage of the Roman *scaenae frons* and led to the popularization of a modified form of medieval simultaneous staging in which the back of a wide but shallow raised stage was composed of either a straight-line colonnade with curtains covering the resulting four or five openings or a colonnade that angled forward so that the central one or two openings were closer to the audience and the others were at an angle to them. In either arrangement, each curtain opening served the same purpose as a medieval mansion, but, since the openings were not differentiated visually from one another, signs were placed over them, identifying each as the home of a central character. This pattern of curtained openings became the standard for academic theatres throughout Europe.

Early professional actors who adopted this system discovered that a continuous line of curtain providing three to five openings was even more versatile. These stages, which were hybrids of Classical and medieval designs, were generally installed as end stages in existing halls or in courtyards in which audience members sat on benches around three sides, sometimes on two or more levels. The audience also sat on benches or stood in the centre area facing the stage, but this area could be left open for incidental entertainment. In 1513 Tommaso Inghirami, who had studied with Laetus, had a freestanding temporary hall built to house just such an academic

theatre in the Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome. The innovation of this building was not in the house, where the audience still sat on benches around three sides, but in the attempt to re-create a Roman *scaenae frons* in a more substantial form. This focused attention on the distinctly non-Classical nature of the house in these hall theatres. By 1545, when Sebastiano Serlio published book two of his *Complete Works on Architecture and Perspective*, some court theatres were using semicircular stepped "amphitheatre" seating in their existing halls. But in these theatres the academic interest in understanding the *scaenae frons* was replaced with a fascination for the recently rediscovered art of perspective.

The first known use of perspective scenery in theatre dates to 1508, when it was used on a large painted backdrop. By the 1540s, however, pairs of rectangular panels connected in the shape of an L (angled wings) were being arranged at uniform intervals along each side of the stage. Three-dimensional architectural details were put on these angled wings, which provided a continuous perspective that gave the overall picture greater depth and allowed the wing units to serve the same function as medieval mansions. At the same time, the floor of the stage, after allowing a few feet of flat space for the actors, was angled upward toward the vanishing point of the backdrop (hence the modern designation of "upstage," meaning away from the audience, and "downstage," meaning toward the audience). Perspective dictated that, for the first time in theatre history, stages would be deeper than they were wide, though actors still confined themselves to a wide shallow band of stage nearest the audience.

The fascination with perspective was so powerful that not even the academic theatres could resist it, as can be seen in the famous Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, Italy, the oldest existing theatre in Europe. This theatre was designed by the Italian architect Andrea Palladio to fit into an

existing hall, and it opened in 1585, five years after his death. It was built for experiments in the staging of Greek tragedy, though it was clearly a Roman odeum. The stage in this theatre measures about 82 feet (25 metres) across and 22 feet (7 metres) deep. The Olimpico has the most elaborate reconstruction of a Roman *scaenae frons* ever attempted. It has five doors: a large one stands at its centre and is flanked by a door on each side and one door at each end. Behind four of these doors is the forced perspective vista of a city street, while behind the central door there are three such vistas. But such a theatre was too expensive to be copied by the average academic institution, did not allow for the changing of the perspective that was becoming increasingly in demand at court, and did not offer the versatility needed by professional acting companies. It was not widely imitated.

Permanent theatres are described as having been built at Ferrara in 1531 and at Rome in 1545, but little is known about them except that they are likely to have been court theatres of the theatre-in-the hall type. So dominant was this type that even when the Confrérie de la Passion opened the first purpose-built public theatre in Europe since Roman times, the Théâtre de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne, in 1548, it followed the theatre-in-the-hall model. The Bourgogne had two levels of galleries along three sides of an open floor (*parterre*). Parts of the first-level galleries may have been divided into boxes. The audience capacity of this theatre exceeded 1,000. It had an end stage that was around 6 feet (2 metres) high, just under 45 feet (14 metres) wide, and perhaps 35 feet (11 metres) deep. Multiple setting in the medieval manner was used there. Its most significant innovation was a second-level stage at the back of the main stage. The Bourgogne was eventually followed by purpose-built public theatres across Europe. The first public theatre in Italy was built in Venice in 1565, but it is not known if it was a freestanding theatre or one in an existing hall. In London the Red Lion (1567) was freestanding, built in a garden with seating

risers and a large stage backed by a tower. The indoor playhouses of St. Paul's (1575) and Blackfriars (1576) in London, on the other hand, were clearly adaptations of existing halls. Meanwhile, in Spain a charitable society opened a public theatre in a courtyard in the Calle de Sol in 1568, and in 1574 Spain's first purpose-built public theatre was constructed in Sevilla as a courtyard theatre.

In 1576, however, a playhouse called The Theatre was built in London. It used the first truly innovative design to be found in a public playhouse. Unlike the others, which were rectangular, The Theatre was polygonal with perhaps as many as 20 sides, or bays. Each bay was about 12 feet (3.5 metres) deep and contained three levels of seating covered by a roof, making it look like an evolved form of the buildings shown in the Fouquet miniatures of the 1460s and '70s. The central area of the polygon was open-air, and the audience there stood around a large stage, about 5 feet (1.5 metres) high, which was integrated into several of the bays at one end of the building. Behind the stage was a tiring-house, the backstage area of the playhouse. The tiring-house façade was used like the *scaenae frons* of a Roman theatre to provide a permanent architectural background that, with minimal scenic additions, could be used for a remarkable variety of plays. This basic design became the pattern for all open-air theatres in London and was one of the most successful examples of theatre design of the time. In 1598 The Theatre was taken down, and its timbers were used to build the Globe Theatre, which became famous for its association with William Shakespeare, who owned a 10 percent share in it and saw most of his greatest plays staged there.

The two most famous public theatres of Madrid, the Corral de la Cruz (1579) and the Corral del Príncipe (1583), were developed piecemeal over time out of existing courtyards. But the Spanish

theatres still had many features in common with their London counterparts. They organized the audience on at least three levels (covered by a roof) around the periphery of an open-air space in which a large part of the audience stood. But the Spanish theatres were always rectangular; their stages were always smaller; and their use of medieval mansion-type scenery was more extensive than the English theatres. The audiences of the Spanish theatres were segregated by gender, women having their own galleries (*cazuela*), but there was no such segregation in England. The last open-air theatre to be built in England was the second Fortune Theatre of 1623; the last in Spain was the *corral* at Almagro (1628), the only *corral* theatre still in existence today. After the early 17th century, both England and Spain joined the rest of Europe in making their public theatres indoor spaces.

In Asia, theatre remained outdoors for much longer. By the 17th century, Chinese audiences had stopped standing in the central area in front of the stage and started sitting at low tables where they could be served refreshments during performances. In Japan, by the late 16th century, a design suitable for the 200-year-old Noh drama was finally being established. In its basic form, a Noh theatre was much like a Chinese theatre, with a raised square stage of about 18 feet (5.5 metres) on each side covered by a roof supported by pillars at the four corners. The Noh stage was set on the long side of an existing rectangular courtyard, and the audience sat only on the porches of the buildings that surrounded the courtyard. An orchestra occupied the rear of the stage, and a chorus occupied the side of the stage to the audience's right. But the most distinctive feature of these theatres was a bridge (*hashigakari*) that connected the stage to the dressing room. It was located 33 to 52 feet (10 to 16 metres) to the audience's left. This allowed for long dramatic entrances and exits. The only other entrance was a small "hurry door" at the back of the stage. The audience in Noh theatres rarely exceeded 500.

Soon after 1600 the newly created Kabuki theatre adopted the Noh stage for its performances, but its courtyards consisted of two levels of galleries that were built around an open space. The open space was divided into a series of square boxes where groups of audience members could sit on mats. The long bridge of the Noh stage was widened to provide extra space for Kabuki's more gymnastic style of staging, and sometime after 1724 a new bridge (*hanamichi*) was built out into the audience to link the stage to the back of the house so that long entrances and exits could continue. (By the 1770s, two such bridges were in use.) Also in 1724, Kabuki theatres began to be converted to indoor playhouses, and gradually the roof structure and four posts of the old Noh stage were abandoned. A forestage was added in 1736. In that same year Kabuki theatres began using a front curtain to allow for scene changes, something never done in Noh. There was no interest in perspective scenery in Japanese theatre in the 17th or 18th century, but there was a great interest in spectacle, and the Kabuki theatres developed sophisticated elevator traps and even turntables more than 75 years before they became a regular feature of Western stages. With this interest in stage machinery, it is not surprising that Kabuki theatres began to use the proscenium stage about 1908. But the proscenium arches, still used in modern Kabuki, are very wide, as much as 93 feet (28 metres), and members of the audience, being on the long side of the rectangle, sit quite close to the stage.

Baroque and Rococo

Public theatres in Europe did not experiment with perspective scenery until the first opera house, the San Cassiano, was built in Venice in 1637. The experimentation with perspective had taken place only in the West and only in court theatres, but it led to the invention of the proscenium arch and the clockwork stage. The proscenium was first used about 1560 to

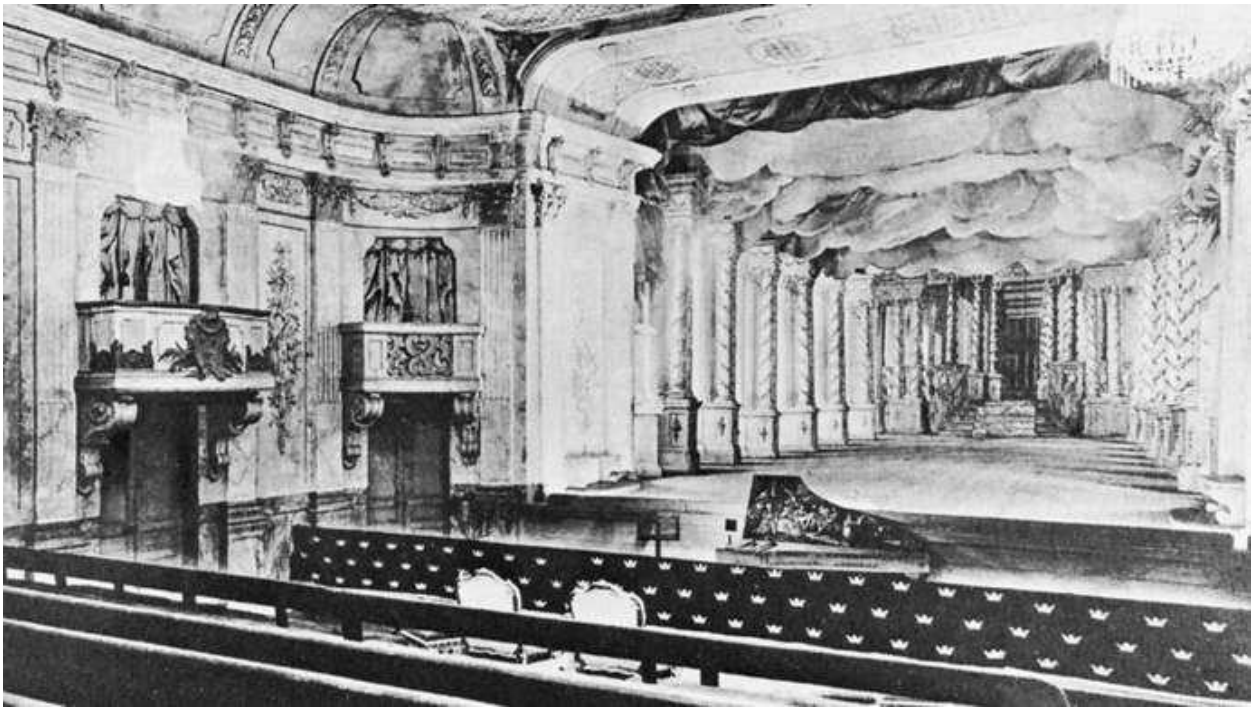
provide a frame for a fixed-perspective vista. But the magical effect of perspective was so compelling that people wanted to see it change, preferably before their eyes, and the proscenium served the additional purpose of hiding the necessary machinery. Large devices shaped like a prism with a different scene on each of the three sides, called *periaktoi* by Vitruvius, were used in place of angled wings to achieve some of the earliest set changes. This was the system in use when Bernardo Buontalenti built the Teatro degli Uffizi (1585) in Florence, the first theatre with a permanent proscenium stage. This was a cumbersome system, however, and it was not until 1600 that efficient methods of scene changing could be devised. That year the technique was developed for transferring a perspective painting onto a series of flat surfaces, facing the audience, along the sides of a stage (wings), across the stage at the level of the top of the wings (boarders), and at the rear of the stage (backdrops). Eventually the wings, boarders, and backdrops of a stage could be changed from one set to another in 10 seconds while any number of special effects took place simultaneously; this was the clockwork stage that, along with the proscenium stage, dominated theatre for the next 200 years. It was this type of theatre that was built in Parma in 1618; the Teatro Farnese is today the oldest proscenium arch theatre in existence.

From 1650 onward, stages became increasingly mechanized. Stage technology was an important feature of theatre design in the Baroque period, but its impact was seen primarily in the ever-increasing demands for backstage space. Technology also influenced onstage space in England and France, where a tradition of having audience members sitting along the sides of the stage had become fashionable and was not entirely eliminated until the 1760s. In the Baroque period, architects who designed theatres focused on the layout and decoration of the house. At the start of the period, the audience area was most often rectangular, but it also took the shape of a U, a

horseshoe, and a bell. While all these forms continued to be used during the 17th century, increasing attention was being given to a variety of elliptical shapes, especially as theatres were increasingly specialized for use primarily for spoken drama, opera, or music, each of which required its own acoustical properties.

The shape of the house was determined by the shape of the galleries that formed it. These continued to increase in number to as many as seven, all but the uppermost level of which might be divided into boxes. Boxes were an outgrowth of the medieval tournament stands and are described as components of a theatre as early as 1516. They were a common feature of both English and Spanish playhouses by the 1580s, but by the mid-17th century they had taken on a new importance. In court theatres and opera houses, boxes and their location within the theatre were a confirmation of social status. In public theatres, boxes were sold to pay for the construction of the building, and theatres became increasingly dependent on this form of financing. The Baroque theatres are often referred to as “box, pit, and gallery” theatres, a term reflecting the social hierarchy established within them.

As the political challenges to such a hierarchy grew across Europe during the period, however, this theatrical form was also challenged. Jacques-François Blondel published one of the first attacks on Baroque theatre designs, and especially on boxes, in 1771. But by this time there already had been numerous examples of more democratic arrangements of audience spaces, ironically in court theatres, where rulers were increasingly interested in avoiding rivalries. The Drottningholm Theatre, a court theatre in Sweden, was, for instance, built with only two decorative boxes near the stage and no galleries. Public theatres had an additional incentive for the elimination of boxes. These theatres were becoming so large that they had reached the limits of the ability of actors to project their voices in them. Reducing the number of boxes allowed for larger numbers of people to be into the same volume of space. But the transition to these kinds of arrangements in the public theatres was slow, and it was still slower in the opera houses.



Early in the Baroque period the decoration scheme of theatres was largely restrained, but it became increasingly ornate until it reached the heights of the Rococo in the mid-18th century. After that peak, theatre decor gradually grew more restrained again as theatres, and architecture more broadly, moved into the age of the Classical revival in the last quarter of the 18th century. Increasing attention also was paid to front-of-house facilities, from ticket offices to lobbies, during the Baroque period.

PROPERTY DESIGN IN THEATRE

Defined as movable and immovable materials or objects used by performers on stage to succinctly pass across the meaning and essence of the performance (dance, drama and music) to the audience, there are nuances that are considered before stage properties are designed. This is because, all stage properties communicate. They are symbols of communication. They are coded languages that are decoded by the spectators. Properties are used for character portrayal. In other

words, they serve as tools for characterisation. They project distinctive personality traits. “They are the articles or furnitures, dress, objects or materials except scenery used on stage in the performance of a play”. This definition is encompassing as it dovetails into some other arts of performance such as the costume art. However, Adeyemi posits that “properties are the smaller items which complete visual background of a play” (1973, p.40). Adeyemi thus places properties below other arts such as costume art, architecture /set art and make up. Yet, this is wrong as it should be noted that properties are not only items that facilitate a further understanding of a play, but it is a vital art of the theatre. Thus properties serve even a more important role in theatre performances the same way other arts do. This notwithstanding, the topic of the functionality of properties in performances became a subject of discourse in the wake of numerous experimentations in the theatre. Alfred Jarry’s avant-garde drama, *Ubu Roi*, contains a lot of properties that were projected with the lines of the characters. In the same vein, Jerzy Grotowski, a Polish theatre director of repute in his articles, *Towards a poor theatre* and *Theatre New Testament*, states the triviality of stage properties. In essence, he sees theatre as “essentially what takes place between spectator and actor. All other arts are supplementary” Grotowski posits that the most important factor in a theatre performance is the communion between the actor and the spectator. (Dukore, 1974, p.988). The costume, set (architecture), make up, light and stage properties were also less paramount in his plays. Hence, Jerzy Grotowski’s theatre is one in which the stage is bare. It is the lacking in the other arts that facilitates Grotowski’s theatre being called a poor theatre. Thus, going by this terminology, we can surmise that a rich or wealthy theatre is that theatre that incorporates all other arts of the theatre such as the classical Greek theatre, the Renaissance theatre, theatre in the Restoration era, the Romantic, Realist Naturalistic,

Post Modern and Post-Postmodern theatres. In his submission on Jerzy Grotowski's negation of stage properties, Lawal states that:

> Grotowski's concept of theatre is towards the poor. He does not believe in elaborate costume and scenery…the theatre is therefore reduced to its barest form, that of communication between the actors and the audience…actors should emphasize their inner resource in terms of their state of mind rather than the paraphernalia of elaborate robe, throne and other properties. (2010, p.44).

Other schools of thought have appropriated the limitation of poor theatre and thereby, advocated for the utility of elaborate set, costumes and properties. They looked at this from the gamut of the function of the property as codes with which communication is made. Therefore, "all the forms of décor, as well as the physical nature of the stage have one fundamental function-to provide the best conditions for his (actor) expressing the play" (Gassner, 1941, p.120). In the same vein, Emasealu states that:

> The choice of play should be subject to the availability of competent and adequate human and material resources that would meaningfully and sincerely promote effective communication. While such resources would include actors and actresses, costumes costumiers, lighting and set designers and executants among others, the material means would comprise funds, furniture, stage properties, set, lighting equipment and costume. (2010, p.76).

African theatre all through the ages is not devoid of stage properties. From Pre-Colonial African theatre through the theatre of the Colonial Tradition and Post-Colonial African theatre, properties have been an integral Art in the communication of the message of the playwrights. Ngugi Wathiong'o with his theatre of African renaissance, Wole Soyinka's mytho-political theatre, Femi Osofisan, Rasheed Gbadamosi and Bakare Rasaki the revolutionaries, Zulu Sofola with her theatre of African feminism, Ahmed Yerima and his Post-Modern theatre, Sam Ukala with his theatre of Folkism cum Neo-Folkism, have utilized stage properties in passing the

message in their dramas across to the audience. Thus, the place of stage properties in the Nigerian cum African theatre cannot be over emphasized. With the incorporation of traditional African aesthetic elements in modern theatre in Nigeria, the use of the staff by a native doctor in the Nigerian cum African setting, the use of the crown by a king, the swords and guns being held by security operatives, and a host of other properties, serve as tools of communication in the Modern Nigerian theatre.