

## The Theatre Goers Guide Samford University Theatre Appreciation Class

A very effective way to learn about theater is to attend and report on a performance, to see a play brought to life in a production complete with actors, sets, costumes, lights, sound and audience--and then to describe your experience in the form of a written report. This Theatergoer's Guide (which accompanies *The Theater Experience* by Edwin Wilson and *Living Theater: A History*, *Theater: The Lively Art*, and *Theater: The Lively Art, Brief Edition*, by Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb) has been designed to help you enjoy your experience at the theater, appreciate it, and then write effectively about it.

### **THEATERGOING**

#### **Why go to the Theater?**

Why go to the theater at all? What is so special about a theater performance? In a theatrical performance, there are live performers in the presence of a live audience, and the electricity generated between actors and spectators is the most exciting aspect of attending a theater production. In theater--unlike film or television--each performance is unique because each audience responds differently and brings different expectations and sensibilities to the event. For example, think about a comedy onstage and a comedy in the movies. During the staged performances, the audience's response or lack of response will clearly affect the way the actors and actresses shape their performances. During the running of the film, the reaction of the audience in the movie house can obviously have no impact on the performers. A theater event exists in time and changes over time; a film exists on celluloid and does not change. Remember, then, that although a theater performance has many components--including playing space, scenery, costumes, lighting, sound, and text--its primary elements are always the performers and the audience.

When people think about why they go to the theater, there are usually three basic reasons: entertainment, community interaction, and personal growth. To begin with, for most audience members the desire to go to the theatre is connected with their desire to be entertained. For these people, theater is a way to relax, a source of enjoyment and fun, an escape from daily existence. Slapstick comedies, farces, musicals, and melodramas are examples of theatrical works meant primarily to entertain. Second, a theatrical performance is a communal experience: it brings people together for a period of time. (\*in fact, the origins of theater are closely related to religious ceremonies and rituals which are also communal experiences.) Third, theater can enrich individual audience members intellectually, emotionally, and perhaps spiritually. It can help us to see and understand the complexities and crosscurrents of everyday life and can also expand our horizons far beyond everyday life. Indeed, some theater artists believe that the function of theater is to "teach."

When you yourself attend the theater try to determine your own reasons for being there--keeping in mind that many theater pieces are both entertaining and enriching. From reading plays, watching television, and attending movies, you have probably formed a good idea of what kind of live theater you will enjoy. You know that comedies and farces can make you laugh and feel carefree. Dramas and tragedies can introduce you to new ways of looking at the world, and perhaps can lead you to think about parallels between your own experience and the universal human condition.

#### **Preparing for Theatergoing**

Before you attend a theater performance, you can do some preparation that will help you get the most out of it. Reading about the play you are going to see can add to your enjoyment and understanding. If the play is a classic, you might find some useful information about it in your textbook or a theater history book. In addition, there may be books or articles about the life and work of the playwright, or about drama and theater in the period when the play was written. You may also want to read the play itself. All this can provide background for you as a theatergoer.

Another effective way to prepare for a theater event is to read a review of the production. Often, you will find that a local newspaper has printed an article by a critic describing and evaluating the performance and giving background information about the play and playwright. A word of warning, however, do not be unduly swayed by the opinions expressed by the reviewer, since what you like may be completely different from what he or she prefers. Use the review only as a source of information, and go to the theater with an open mind.

## **Buying Tickets**

Buying tickets for a theater event can be done in many ways, depending on the type of theater you are attending. For example, if you want to see a large-scale commercial production on Broadway or in a major touring house, you can buy tickets through the box office, by telephone, or through an online ticket agency. The best seats at such a production can cost as much as \$150 each, but reduced-price tickets are often available; in many cities, there are special booths selling tickets at half price, student "rush" tickets are usually available on the day of the performance (sometimes just before the performance starts); and reduced-rate coupons may be offered (in New York these coupons called twofers--originally, "two for" the price of one).

If you are going to a small theater or a noncommercial theater, you may find that tickets can be bought only at the box office, and sometimes, only on the day of the performance. (this is true, for example, at some off-off-Broadway theaters in New York.)

It is difficult to generalize about regional theaters, since there is a wide variety of such theaters across the United States, each with its own method of selling tickets. To buy tickets for a performance at a regional theater, the best thing to do is to call the box office for information, or look at a local newspaper to find an advertisement for the play.

Traditional pasteboard theater tickets still exist, though today tickets are often generated and printed out by computer. If seating is reserved, your ticket will tell you where you are seated. "General admission" tickets, on the other hand, do not entitle you to a specific seat, so you might want to arrive at the theater early to be sure of getting a good location. (If you have a reservation, you should be sure to arrive on time, since many theaters will not seat latecomers until there is an appropriate break in the performance.)

## **The Lobby**

The lobby of a theater space is a "holding area" for the audience members before they enter the auditorium. Usually, a lobby tells you something about what kind of theater experience you can expect to have. For example, commercial Broadway theaters, well-established regional theaters, and touring houses often have lavish lobbies; off-Broadway, off-off-Broadway, and alternative theaters frequently have small lobbies that are modestly decorated or even undecorated. In some small theaters, there may be no lobby at all: the audience members simply congregate out on the street.

You may find considerable information in the lobby that can help you better understand and appreciate a theater event. For example, there may be photographs of the performers and other artistic personnel (these photos are known as head shots), photos of the current production or past productions, posters reflecting the point of view of the production, historical information about the theater or the company, or awards won by the company. In addition, you might be able to pick up brochures for season tickets or future productions.

From the moment you enter the lobby area, you should begin to assess your feelings about the experience.

## **Programs**

As you enter the auditorium, you will probably receive a program from an usher who may also escort you to your seat. The program will contain much useful information that can help you enjoy and understand the theatre event.

In the program, or playbill, you will find the title of the play, the author, the cast of characters, the actors and actresses, the designers, the director, and various other people involved in mounting the production. In some playbills, you will also find brief biographies of these people. In addition, you will find information about the setting of the play (place and time), its division into acts or scenes, and the number of intermissions.

Some playbills also include notes about the play, such notes may be written by the playwright, the director, or the dramaturgist--the literary advisor to the production. Notes like these can make you aware of the historical relevance of a play and the director's approach to the text.

Be sure to read the program and any notes in it, but don't read this material during the actual course of the performance. The best time to read the program is either before the performance starts or during intermission.

## **The Theater Environment**

One of the most important environmental elements you will encounter when you enter a theater is the performance space. The presentation may be taking place in a traditional theater building with an arena, thrust, or proscenium stage, in a converted space, or in a "found" space.

Another aspect of the environment is the locale of the theater. For example, New York has theaters in the Broadway district, off-Broadway, and off-off-Broadway. For the most part, Broadway theaters are large proscenium-arch spaces; off-Broadway theaters (as the term implies) are outside the Broadway district, are much

smaller, and usually seat about 300 in a proscenium, thrust, or arena configuration, off-off-Broadway theaters house experimental groups in small found spaces and seat only about 100.

Across the United States, the many regional theaters have a variety of shapes and sizes. Larger cities often have alternative theaters, which are like the off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway theaters in New York. Commercial road-show houses are modeled after Broadway theaters. Some theater spaces outside of New York are much larger than Broadway theaters--there are municipal auditoriums and opera houses seating as many as 3,000 to 4,000.

Other types of theater environments include dinner theaters, which combine theatrical entertainment with dining and are very popular in many cities--for example, Orlando, Florida. Many communities have popular amateur community theaters, housed in traditional theater spaces or found spaces. High schools, colleges, and universities also produce many theatrical events for their own students and their communities.

Each theater environment creates a specific ambience and unique expectations on the part of the audience. As you enter a theatre and its playing space, you might want to think about what the atmosphere is like and what impact it has on you. After you are seated, but before the performance actually begins, you may also want to think about, and assess, certain other elements. Is there a curtain, for example? If so, is it raised or lowered? What effect does a raised or lowered curtain suggest? If the curtain is up, is scenery visible? If so, what does the scenery seem to suggest about the production?

### **Audience Etiquette**

Western theater, particularly since the nineteenth century, has developed certain rules of behavior for audience members--expectations about what audiences do and don't do. However, you should keep in mind that any given theater event might have some unique expectations about the audience's behavior.

At a traditional theater performance, the audience is expected to remain silent for the most part, and not to interrupt the performers. Audience members should not talk to each other as if they were at home watching television, they should not hum or sing along with music, unwrap candy or other food, eat loudly, search through a purse, or backpack, or take notes in a distracting way. They should also turn off cell phones, iPods, or other electronic devices. Remember that the actors can hear the audience noises and distracting behavior will have an impact on their concentration and performance. Noise and distractions also affect the experience of other spectators.

Students may be concerned about note-taking, since they often will need to make notes in order to remember key elements of the production. An unobtrusive way of taking notes is to jot down only brief phrases or terms that will jog your memory later. Then, you can embellish your notes during the intermission or intermissions, or after the last curtain.

Of course, traditional audiences are not always absolutely quiet. Audiences at comedies can laugh, for instance. Audiences at musicals can applaud after a song (in fact, they're expected to). On the other hand audiences at serious plays might not applaud until the end of the performance--and even then, an audience may be so stunned or so deeply moved that there will be a moment of silence before the applause begins.

As noted above, not all of these traditional expectations may apply at every theater event. Dinner theaters are one example, since the audience may be eating during the presentation. (We might also note that audiences eat during the performance in many traditional Asian theaters, and they may speak back to the stage). Audiences at some productions are expected to interact with the performers in some comic presentations, for instance, actors may enter the audience space or actually speak to individual audience members, and in some nontraditional productions, audience members may even be expected to participate in the performance. (We should mention, however, that because this kind of interaction or participation departs from the usual behavior of theater audiences, it makes some theatergoers feel uncomfortable.)

### **Intermissions**

Intermissions serve a variety of functions. Of course, you do not have to leave your seat. Many audience members stay in place and use the time just to stand and stretch. You can use the respite to review your notes, go to the restroom, buy refreshments (if they are available), and discuss the production with friends. In most theaters, smoking in the lobby is no longer allowed, so smokers must go outside. You'll need to keep your ticket stub if you leave the lobby area.

An intermission usually lasts about 15 minutes, and the lights in the lobby will be flashed on and off as a signal that the intermission is ending. You should return to your place when signaled to do so, because the theater may not seat you if you return late, after the performance has resumed.

### **Keeping an Open Mind**

One of the main purposes of theater is to let you see the world from different perspectives and experience

differing viewpoints and lifestyles. Consequently, there may be times when what you see onstage will be something with which you disagree or even find offensive. In a situation like this, it is helpful to keep an open mind while you are watching the performance. It is not necessary for you to agree with or approve of what you are hearing or seeing, and you may find that after the show is over you reject everything that has been presented. However, while the performance is going on, you should try to suspend judgement and experience it as receptively and tolerantly as possible.

## **HOW TO WRITE A THEATER REPORT**

In this section, we'll give you some guidelines for writing a report on a theater event. But the first and most important advice we can give you is this: be sure not to let concerns (or even fears) about writing a paper prevent you from fully enjoying the theater experience itself. You should not become so distracted by note-taking, for example, that you cannot concentrate carefully on what is taking place in the performance. Your response to a production will be determined by how closely you have been engaged by the action onstage. If you spend too much time and effort thinking about your report during the performance, you will defeat the purpose of attending the theater.

### **Turning Notes Into a Report**

You should expand your notes into a complete report as soon as possible, while your impressions are still fresh. Many instructors recommend writing a report the same day as the performance or no later than a day or two after it. The longer you wait, the harder it will be to reconstruct your experience and substantiate your impressions by citing specific examples and instances. Keep in mind that most theater critics are expected to respond almost instantaneously to performances they see; in a sense, you too are being asked to make quick critical judgements.

It is useful to begin with an outline and then write a draft based on your outline. Next, revise your draft as often as necessary to produce the final report. As you revise, check your spelling and grammar carefully. Although theater courses are not English courses, all instructors expect papers that have been thoroughly edited and proofread. In addition, although it is your ideas that will earn most of the grade, a sloppily constructed paper will not present your ideas well.

### **What Makes a Good Theater Report?**

#### Content

A good theater report is a combination of subjective responses--how you "felt" about the event--and objective analysis and support for your feelings. Just saying that you liked or disliked a production is not enough. The key question is always "Why?" For example, you may have hated a performer in a production, but noting that you hated him or her is not enough for a report. Why did you feel this way? Was the actor totally unlike the character? Did the actor fail to enunciate the lines clearly? Did the actor convey emotions that seemed inappropriate to the dramatic action? Did he or she move inappropriately or clumsily onstage? Did he or she seem not to understand or express the character's motivation? These are the kinds of questions you will need to answer in order to substantiate your opinion about the performance, and you will have to support each answer by describing some specific aspect of the performance.

#### Structure

Like a good play, a good theater report has a clear beginning, middle, and end.

At the beginning, you should state your point of view; you may also indicate how you felt about the production in general or about the specific elements you will discuss. Sometimes a good paper can begin with a striking image or an idea that you believe to be at the heart of the theatergoing experience. The most important characteristic of the beginning of a successful paper is that it gives a strong sense of what you consider significant about your experience.

The middle of your paper should contain all the evidence and analysis that substantiates the viewpoint expressed in the beginning. This would include specific examples and details from the production. The more specific and analytical this section is, the more successful the paper will be. Through your description and analysis, the reader should be able to visualize important and representative moments in the production.

At the end of your paper, you should recapitulate your point of view and find some way to leave the reader

with a clear sense of the conclusions you have drawn. As with the beginning of a paper, it can be effective to close the paper with a vivid image or idea. Remember that your conclusion will be the last impression left with your reader.

### Usage

There are a few conventions for writing about theater productions. For example, the title of a play is usually capitalized; and the title of a full-length play is either underlined or italicized, though the title of a one-act play is generally in quotation marks. When you name production personnel, the first reference should give the full name, but thereafter only the last name should be used.

Most instructors expect papers to be typed or printed out rather than handwritten. If you use a personal computer, remember that the "spell check" will not catch every error. Remember too that word processing requires careful attention to formatting and printing. The harder it is for your instructor to read your paper, the harder it will be for him or her to evaluate your ideas.

Your instructor may recommend or require specific stylistic rules or a specific physical format for papers. Be sure that you understand such requirements at the beginning of the semester.

### **Key Questions for a Theater Report**

These questions are intended as a guide for writing a theater report. You can use them to help you focus your thoughts about the various elements of a production. Note that you should keep the specific assignment in mind, since some instructors will ask you to write about particular elements whereas others may ask you to evaluate the entire production. In either case, however, these questions should prove helpful.

#### Acting

1. Were the actors believable, given the requirements of the play? If they were believable, how did they seem to accomplish that? If they weren't believable, what occurred to impair or destroy believability? (As you discuss this, be sure to separate the performer from the role.)
2. Identify the performers you considered most successful. Citing specifics from the production, note what they did well: particular gestures, lines, or moments. Try to describe each performer so as to give the reader a clear image. For example, how did the performer's voice sound? How did he or she move? How did he or she interpret the role?
3. If there were performers you did not like, identify them and explain why you did not like them. Give concrete examples to explain why their performances were less successful.
4. Acting is more than just a collection of individual performances. The entire company needs to work as a unit, or ensemble. Each actor must not only perform his or her own role but also support the other performers. Discuss how the performance related or failed to relate to one another. Did they listen to each other and respond? Did any actor seem to be "showing off" and ignoring the others?

#### Directing

1. The director unifies a production and frequently provides an interpretation of the text. Did there seem to be a unifying idea behind the production? If so, how would you express it? How were you able to see it embodied in the production? Was it embodied in striking images or in the way the actors developed their performances? You should be aware that this can be one of the most difficult aspects of a production to evaluate, even for very experienced theatergoers.
2. Did all the elements of the production seem to be unified and to fit together seamlessly? How was this reflected in particular, in the visual elements--the scenery, costumes, and lighting?
3. How did the director move the actors around onstage? Were there any moments when you felt that such movement was particularly effective or ineffective? Were entrances and exits smooth?
4. Did the pace, or rhythm, of the production seem right? Did it drag or move swiftly? Did one scene follow

another quickly, or were there long pauses or interruptions?

#### Space

1. What type of theater was it? How large or small was it? How opulent or elaborate? How simple or modern? What type of stage did it have: proscenium, thrust, arena, or some other type? How did the stage space relate to audience seating?
2. What was the size and shape of the playing space?
3. What sort of atmosphere did the space suggest? How was that atmosphere created?
4. Did the space seem to meet the needs of the play? Did it affect the production, and if so, how?

#### Scenery

1. What information was conveyed by the scenery about time, place, characters, and situation? How was the information conveyed to you?
2. What was the overall atmosphere of the setting?
3. Did any colors dominate? How did colors affect your impression of the theater event?
4. Was the setting a specific place, or was it no recognizable or real locale? Did that choice seem appropriate for the play?
5. If the setting was realistic, how effectively did it reproduce what the place would actually look like?
6. Were there symbolic elements in the scenery? If so, what were they? How did they relate to the play?

#### Costumes

1. What information was conveyed by the costumes about time, place, characters, and situation? How was this information conveyed to you?
2. What was the period of the costumes? What was the style? Were the costumes from a period other than the period in which the play was written or originally set? If so, how did this affect the production? Why do you think the choice was made?
3. How was color used to give you clues to the personalities of the character?
4. Did each character's costume or costumes seem appropriate for his or her personality, social status, occupation, etc? Why or why not?
5. Did the costumes help you understand conflicts, differing social groups, and interpersonal relationships? if so, how?

#### Lighting

1. What information was conveyed by the lighting about time, place, characters, and situation? How was this information conveyed to you?
2. Describe the mood of the light. How was color and intensity used to affect mood? What other characteristics of light were used to affect mood? Was the lighting appropriate for the mood of each scene? Why or why not?
3. Was the lighting realistic or nonrealistic? What was the direction of the light? Did it seem to come from a natural source, or was it artificial? Did this choice seem appropriate for the text?
4. Were the actors properly lit? Could their faces be seen?

5. Were light changes made slowly or quickly? How did this affect the play? Did it seem right for the play?

#### Text

1. What was the text for the performance? Was it a traditional play? Was it a play created by the actors or director? Was the piece improvisatory? Note that most productions you attend will use traditional scripts as texts, and most of the following questions are based on this traditional model. However, you can adapt these questions for texts that have been created in nontraditional ways.
2. What was the text about? What was the author of the text trying to communicate to the audience? Did the author try to communicate more than one message?
3. How was the meaning of the text communicated through words, actions, or symbols?
4. Did you agree with the point of view of the text? Why or why not?
5. What was the genre of the text? Was it comedy, tragedy, farce, melodrama, or tragicomedy? Was the text realistic or nonrealistic? Was it presentational or representational?
6. Using terms you have encountered in your theater course or textbook, describe the structure of the text. Was it climactic (intensive)? Was it episodic (extensive)? Was it some combination of the two?
7. Many theorists argue that conflict is necessary for a dramatic text. Describe the conflict within the text in the production you saw. Which characters were in conflict? Was there a moment in the action when the conflict seemed to come to a head? Was the conflict resolved or not? How did you feel about its resolution or lack of resolution? If the conflict was resolved, how was it resolved? How did the conflict seem to embody the meaning of the text?

#### Characters

1. What were the major goals, objectives, and motivations of the leading characters? How did these help you understand the meaning of the text?
2. Were the characters realistic, symbolic, allegorical, totally divorced from reality, etc.?
3. How did minor characters relate to major characters? For instance, were they contrasts or parallels?
4. Did you identify most with one of the characters? If so, describe this character and explain why you identified with him or her.

#### Worksheets for Theatergoing

The following worksheets have been designed as an aid to note-taking. They should be used while you are attending a production. They do not call for extensive information, rather, they will help you jot down quick impressions that you can use later to jog your memory when you are actually developing your report. That is, the questions on these sheets are meant to help you accumulate information which can be used to respond to the more in-depth questions in the preceding section. To fill out the worksheets, you will enter information at three different times during your attendance at the theater event. Remember: Do not try to write an essay or even any fully developed statements while you are watching the performance; that would defeat the whole purpose of theatergoing.

## Notes before the performance

### 1. Theater

- a. Jot down three adjectives that describe the atmosphere of the theater.
- b. What kind of theater is it: proscenium, thrust, arena, found space?
- c. Draw a quick sketch of the auditorium area below.

### 2. Program

- a. Jot down when and where the play is set and any other information you have gleaned from the program.
- b. Read any notes in the program and underline three sentences that you believe will help you better understand the production.
- c. Underline any historical information in the program about the play or playwright.

### 3. Playing space

- a. Can you see the playing space before the performance begins, or is the curtain down?
- b. If you can see the playing space, what are your impressions about the scenery? What does it seem to suggest about the production? (Just jot down a few adjectives that reflect your first impressions.)

## Intermission notes

1. Who is the central character? With whom does the character conflict? Write down their names
2. For each of the characters you have just named, jot down three adjectives that describe his or her personality and physical attributes.
  
3. For each of the characters you have named, write down three adjectives to describe how you feel about the performance of the actor playing him or her.
  
  
4. Briefly describe a specific moment or scene that you thought was particularly dramatic, effective, or significant.
  
  
5. Describe a striking use of an image or simile by a character, or a moment in which such an image is used.
  
  
6. Has any character directly addressed the audience? Note who and (very briefly) when.
  
  
7. Jot down three adjectives that reflect your impressions about each of the following.  
Scenery  
Costumes  
Lighting
  
8. Write one word or one short phrase which best describes the world of the play (for instance, absurd, unceasingly violent, repressed, uncontrollably cruel, sentimentally romantic, constantly hilarious.)

9. Have any audience members been asked to participate in some way? If so, describe how; also, describe your own reaction

#### Notes after the performance

1. List your initial responses to each of the production elements. Indicate whether you like or dislike each element, and provide an adjective that expresses why you like or dislike it. (Remember that it is these initial responses you will have to defend in your paper.)
2. Review your intermission notes. After the intermission (or after each intermission, if there was more than one), had you changed your opinion about any of the production elements? If so, jot down what changed.
3. Write down what the high point of the action seems to have been and what resolution of the conflict, if any, has occurred.
4. Have any characters changed between the beginning and the conclusion of the action? If so, provide an adjective or a short phrase to describe the character at the outset of the action and another adjective or phrase to describe him or her after the change.
5. Does anything about the play or the production puzzle or confuse you? If so, jot it down.
6. On this basis of this experience, would you go to the theater again? Yes or no? (You will probably not include this point in your paper, but your answer may interest you for its own sake.)