

The Performance Space

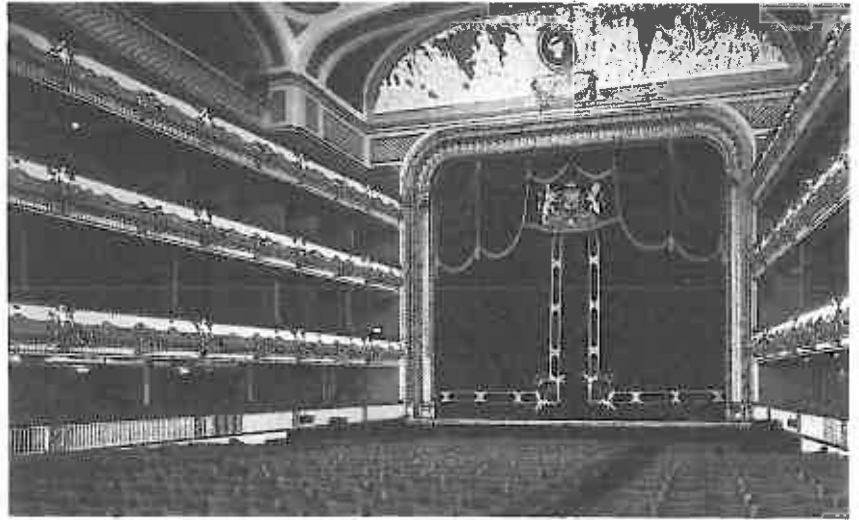
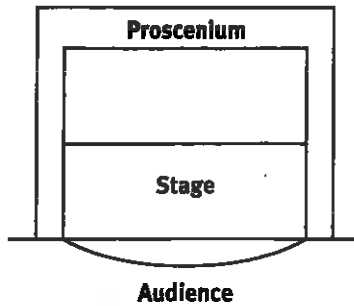
One of the first and most important steps in your training as a director or producer—or as an actor, designer, technician, or writer for the theatre—is understanding the nature of the performance space.

Theatre is defined by three things: a story to tell, performers to tell it, and an audience to respond to it. That means theatre can happen any time or any place those three things come together. In fact, the times and places where theatre happens vary widely, as illustrated here.



Types of Stages

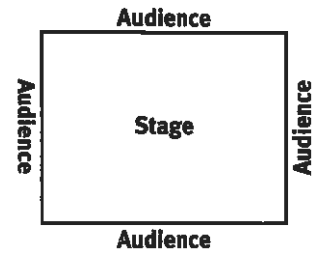
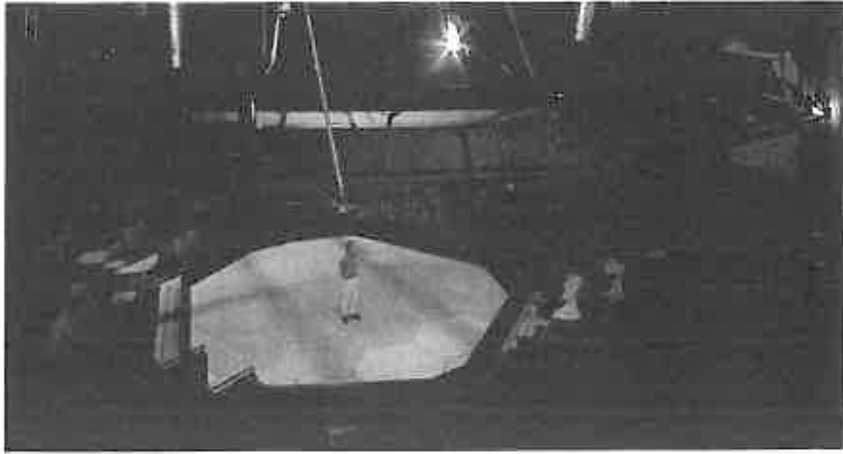
The performance space influences practically all decisions made in the production of a play, including the selection of the play to be produced. As a director or producer, you must be aware of the performance space that you have to work with, of its potentials and limitations. You must know, in addition, something about performance spaces in general. Ordinarily, they are classified according to where the audience sits in relation to the performers.



A **proscenium stage** is like a picture frame. The audience sits on one side to watch the action through the frame. Often, curtains hide the scenery until the play begins.



A **thrust stage** is a combination of the proscenium and the arena stages. The audience sits on two or three sides of the acting area, which projects, or thrusts, into the audience area from a rear wall, which has some kind of scenery. The actors enter and exit through the audience as in an arena stage and also through doors in the rear-wall scenery.



An **arena stage** is sometimes called **in-the-round** because the audience sits all around it. The actors enter and exit from the aisles or sometimes from tunnels under the audience.

Theatre Space Layout and Terms

No matter what the type of stage, most of the terms used for the stage and audience areas are the same. To be able to communicate effectively and efficiently as a director or producer, you must understand the general layout of the entire theatre space and the terms that describe it.

The Lobby

This is the area where the audience gathers before and after performances and during breaks. The **box office**, where playgoers can buy tickets, is usually located in the lobby. Theatre business personnel often have their offices attached to this part of the theatre.

The Auditorium/House

The auditorium, or the area where the audience sits—no matter how it is arranged—is called the **house**. In many theatres, the down-front seats nearest the stage are called the **orchestra**. The **orchestra pit** is the area for musicians; it may extend underneath the stage. In some theatres, there are one or more **balconies**, projecting upper floors, with more audience seating. A lower balcony is often called a **mezzanine**.

At the rear of the house or the top of the balcony may be located a **light booth** or **sound booth**, or both, to house the technicians who control the lights, music, or special sound effects. In many theatres, these controls are in the backstage area.



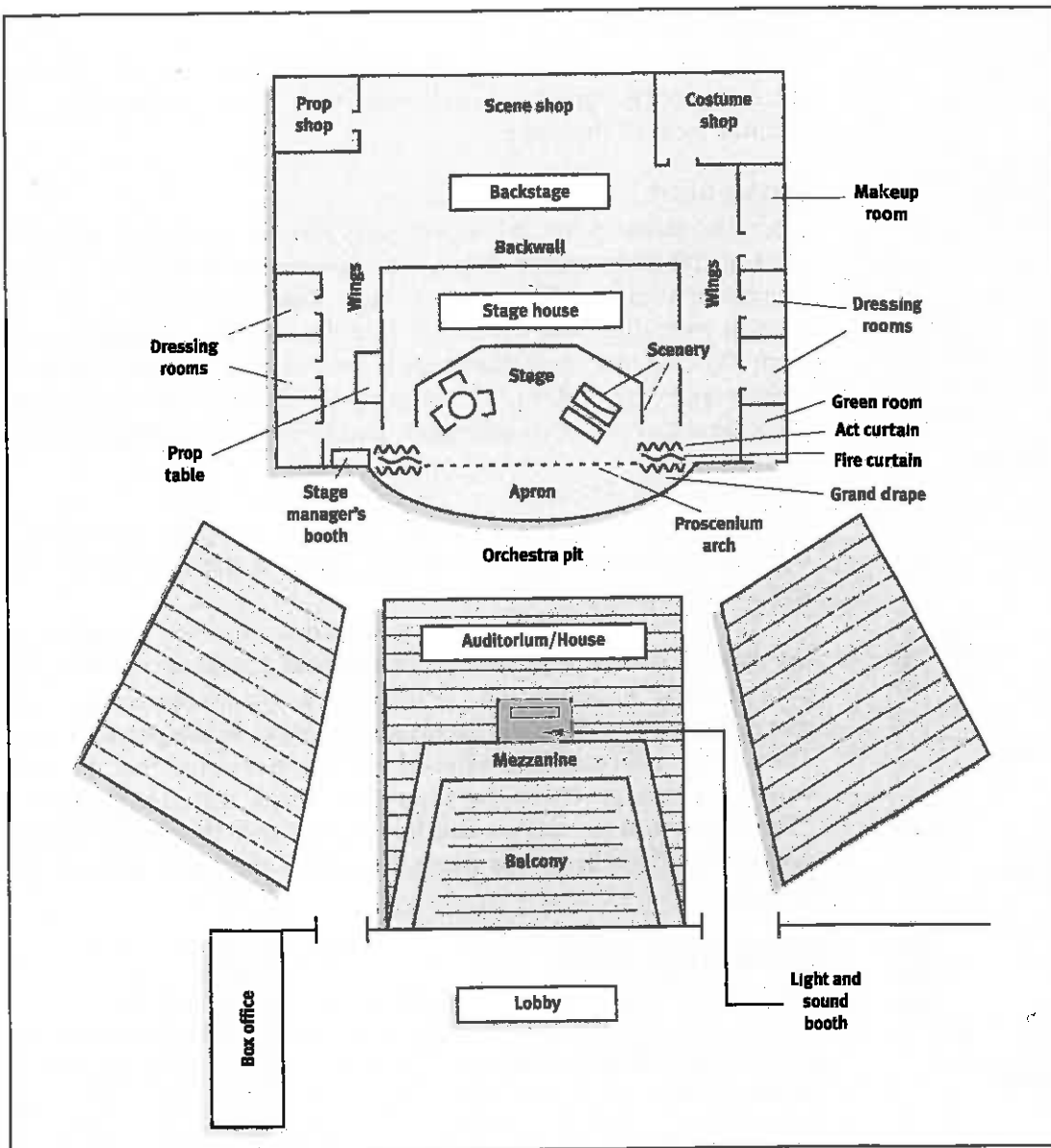
The Stage House

The **stage house** is the area including the **stage**, where the actors perform, and the **fly space** above, where lights and scenery may be flown, or suspended on ropes. In a proscenium stage theatre, the area begins just behind the **proscenium arch**, the picture frame through which the scenery and action are viewed. The **scenery** consists of onstage decoration to help establish the time and place of a play. Several layers of curtains can close off the stage from the audience's view: a **fire curtain**, consisting of metal or fireproof fabric to prevent fire from spreading; an **act curtain**, for between scenes, which is of lighter fabric and is decorated in keeping with the mood or theme of the play; and the **grand drape**, the front curtain, which is typically made of luxurious fabric in deep colors. Proscenium stages often include an **apron**, an acting area that extends forward beyond the arch. In proscenium and thrust stages, the **back wall** of the stage house separates it from the backstage area. Doors in the back wall allow large pieces of scenery to be brought onstage.

Backstage

The **backstage** area defines all areas other than the acting space. It includes the **wings**, the area immediately outside the scenery, unseen by the audience. In the wings is the **stage manager's booth**, the place from which the stage manager calls the actors to the stage, gives the order to raise or lower the curtain, gives cues to both the lighting and sound crews, and supervises changes of scenery. Also in the wings is the **prop table**, where all items carried onstage by the actors are placed. Depending on the building that houses the theatre, the backstage area may also include a **call board**, a bulletin board on which are posted rehearsal times, performance changes, and special notices; **dressing rooms**, private or semiprivate areas where actors put on makeup, change clothes, and store their costumes for a show; a **makeup room**, separate from the dressing room and devoted to makeup; and a **green room**, a lounge area in which actors may wait while not onstage or greet audience members after the performance. Many theatres also have a backstage **stage door**, a private door for actors and theatre personnel, not accessible to the audience.

In addition, the backstage area of most theatres includes storage for lights, permanent scenery pieces, and furniture; a **scene shop**, where scenery is built; perhaps a separate **paint shop**, where scenery is painted; a **costume shop**, where costumes can be made, maintained, and stored; and a **prop shop**, where props are constructed or stored.



Theatre space layout

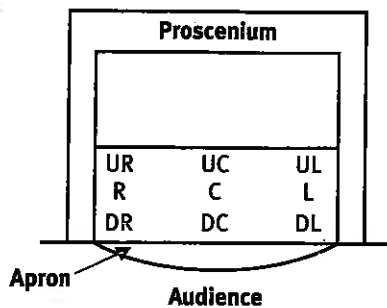


Upstage/Downstage

The terms *upstage* and *downstage* have their origin in an innovation in stage design that was introduced during the Renaissance. In the playhouses of the time, audiences were seated (or stood) on a level space in front of the stage. In order to give them a better view (and to heighten the illusion of depth created by the perspective employed in Renaissance scenic design), the stage floor was actually slanted upward, or **raked**, toward the back of the stage. An example of a mobile raked stage can be seen in this illustration, which depicts a travelling company of actors in the mid-1600s.

Stage Areas

In addition to the terms used for different areas of the theatre, actors, directors, and technical crews have a kind of shorthand to identify areas of the stage.



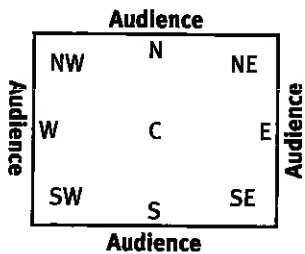
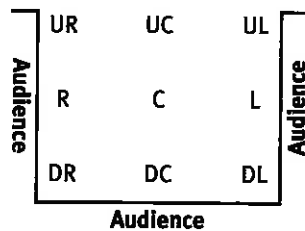
Proscenium Stage Areas

Since the terms were developed long ago by actors and directors working on proscenium stages, the perspective is that of an actor facing the audience from such a stage. **Right** and **left**, for example, refer to your right and left as you face the audience. **Upstage** is away from the audience, and **downstage** is toward the audience. **Center**, or **centerstage**, is the center of the acting area. To these nine stage areas, some directors prefer to add right- and left-of-center designations.

Thrust Stage Areas

A thrust stage can be labeled in the same way as a proscenium stage. Upstage is always away from the audience, in the direction of the wall or the scenery.

Thrust stages come in a variety of shapes. Modified thrust stages are theatres with a proscenium opening and a large apron that projects into the audience. The performance area of the thrust stage that appears on p. 58 has a herringbone shape. Shakespeare's Globe Theatre was a thrust stage. One scholar has speculated that the playwright's frequent resort to lines that break into three parts—"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" and "Friends, Romans, countrymen"—reflects the need to address the three sides of the acting area.



Key	
R = right	N = north
L = left	S = south
U = upstage	E = east
D = downstage	W = west
C = center	

Arena Stage Areas

Since arena stages have audiences on all sides, every direction is toward the audience, and up and down are irrelevant. Instead, actors may use the compass method. One area, probably a main entrance, is called north; the outer edge of the stage is labeled with the other points of the compass. Another method is the clock method, in which the main entrance is called 12 o'clock; the outer edge of the stage is labeled with the other hours of the clock. As with the proscenium stage, the center of the acting area is labeled **C** for **center**.

Stage Areas

- Stage right is stronger than stage left.
- Downstage is stronger than upstage (because of the proximity to the audience).
- The center of a framed area is stronger than any of the peripheral parts.

Fig. #3

