



Drama  
& Theatre

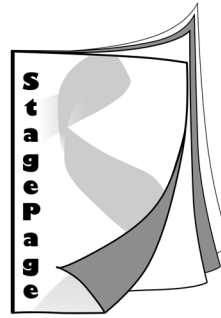
Key Terms  
& Concepts

Third Edition

**Robin Pascoe**  
**Hannah Pascoe**



Drama and Theatre Key Terms and Concepts Third Edition  
first published 2014  
StagePage  
PO Box 827  
Subiaco Western Australia 6904



© Robin Pascoe, Hannah Pascoe and Ben Pascoe

This work is copyright. All rights reserved. Apart from and except under the conditions prescribed in the Copyright Act 1968 of Australia and subsequent amendments, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

Editors: Liz and Robin Pascoe  
Illustrations, design and digital edition by Ben Pascoe and Robin Pascoe

First published in Australia 2001  
Second Edition 2008

**Disclaimer**  
While all due care has been taken in the provision of information, the authors and StagePage do not warrant or represent that any of the information provided is free from errors or omissions. The authors and StagePage have made every effort to ensure that the information is accurate at the date of publication. They disclaim all responsibility and all liability (including without limitation, liability in negligence) for all expenses, losses, damages and costs you might incur as a result of the information being inaccurate or incomplete in any way, and for any reason.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing in publication data

Print Edition: ISBN 978-0-646-91309-4

Digital editions of this version published simultaneously.

# Introduction

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this book is to explain key terms and concepts of drama, theatre and performance for students of introductory and extended drama courses.

## **Audience**

This glossary is designed for students and teachers:

- needing to understand key terms as they connect with drama experiences and texts
- looking for succinct definitions of key ideas about drama
- beginning to make critical responses to their own drama and the drama of other times, places and cultures
- making their own drama, applying drama concepts

## **Scope**

Terms are not listed exhaustively but comprehensively highlight selected key concepts and terms based on surveying the requirements of a range of courses across Australia. Essentially, there has been a selection process based on the experiences of the authors, in particular the experiences of Hannah in her secondary drama course and tertiary actor training. In this edition, all definitions have been reviewed and, in many cases, amplified. New terms have been added in response to changing curriculum requirements.

In writing the definitions, the intention has been to provide concise, user-friendly summaries on which students can build understanding. Where appropriate, these definitions are entry points for further investigation and serve as a signpost for more detailed sources.

## **Responding to changing Drama and Theatre and Curriculum requirements**

Each education authority constructs drama courses in its own way – even when there is broad agreement of general principles and approaches.

Many of the terms in these drama courses are included in the glossary. However, any glossary can be only broadly inclusive and may not address every possible term included in all curriculums. The ways terms are used in courses can change and develop over time and some authorities adopt specific ways of explaining some terms. It is necessary to cross check the terms in this glossary with local usage.

## **Publishing in print and digital formats**

As with the first two editions, this glossary is designed for everyday use in the classroom and for home study. The print edition is formatted to fit into student files and is designed to be practical, supportive and useful. This Third Edition is also being simultaneously published in a digital format, recognising that many students have access in class and workshop to laptops and devices. This digital edition adds the talents of Ben to the team.

## **Sources**

A wide range of primary and secondary sources has been consulted and synthesised in a form designed for the audiences and purposes of this glossary. This glossary has been rewritten responsively as drama curriculum changes and as our knowledge and understanding about drama, theatre and performance sharpens and develops.

## **Organisation**

Information is presented in alphabetical order according to key headings or terms. Within these major headings, there may be a number of other related terms.

There is a comprehensive index covering the terms included in the text.

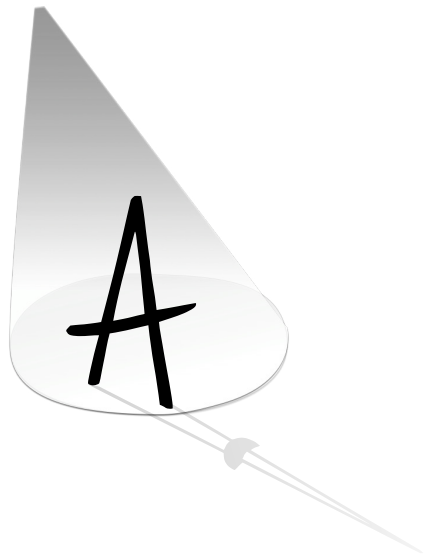
Due to the vast nature of the art form in all of its forms, emerging trends and many approaches to studying drama, this glossary is a snapshot and selective by necessity. Nevertheless, the core essentials are included here for the drama student and as such this glossary is a quick “hit and run” reference for many essential concepts. It is regularly under review reflecting the dynamic development of drama as an art form and area of study.

## **Advice for students**

**Learning, understanding and using terms is a dynamic process. It is an essential part of learning drama.**

**Use terms accurately and consistently. Spell them accurately when you use them.**

**Knowledge for its own sake is hollow. The purpose of terminology is to apply knowledge and deepen understanding in order to make better drama and respond to it more effectively.**



## **A effect**

### *alienation effect*

Translation of *Verfremdungseffekt* term used by Brecht; linked to alienation in drama but also more connected with a sense of distancing audiences from emotional identification with dramatic action for the purpose of making political or social comment through drama.

Brecht and others used A effect through devices such as:

- use of third person past tense narration by characters in the action
- spoken stage directions
- stage design to distance action and to make actors and audiences aware of the artificial nature of drama - the artifice of drama
- songs to interrupt the flow of action and identification
- placards, slides, images
- direct address of audience
- symbolic props
- emblematic costuming

See also *Brechtian Drama, Epic Theatre, Presentational Drama, Alienation Effect*

## **Aboriginal drama**

### *Australian Indigenous drama*

Drama about or by Australian Aboriginal people often drawing on, but not limited to, traditional dance, song and story-telling. Contemporary Aboriginal drama has many forms but shares a capacity for blending realist/representational aspects with spiritual reality presented symbolically. Aboriginal drama provides voice for individual and community perspectives, stories and issues though it is important to note that there are many differing approaches and it is difficult to generalize or make sweeping simplifications about Aboriginal drama.

Aboriginal drama may also refer to drama of other indigenous peoples such as Canadian First Nations peoples.

See also *Australian Drama, Indigenous Drama*

## **abstract**

### *abstraction*

Focusing on an idea, quality or state rather than a concrete object or event. Abstract art does not seek to represent physical events but to achieve effect through focusing on shapes, colours, forms, textures, sounds, movements, etc. Gives primacy to subjective emotional expression, spontaneity

Abstraction is the process of simplifying, extracting or removing elements of a movement or speech to communicate an idea, quality or state rather than their literal meaning.

## **absurdism**

### *Theatre of the Absurd*

Form or style of theatre that focuses on the irrational and illogical aspects of human life and interaction to highlight a sense of helplessness and the inadequacy of a rationalistic approach.

Theatre of the Absurd has been a powerful mid Twentieth Century influence. While often funny in a serious or unusual way, absurdist drama is not to be confused with other forms of comedy. Nor should the term be used indiscriminately for dramatic material that is confusing, contradictory or obscure.

See also *Representational Drama, Presentational Drama*

## **accent**

Accent in drama is taking on the vocal characteristics of a specific nation, place, race or social class.

Also a distinctive emphasis given to a syllable, sound or word.

## **accept (improvisation)**

In improvising when an actor takes or agrees to respond to an offer from another improviser.

See also *improvisation, blocking*

## **acrobatics**

### *Hand stands, flips, tumbles, somersaults*

A performance art and sport incorporating full body activity such as jumping, flipping, contortion, balancing and dance.

See also *circus, dance*

## **act (verb)**

To take on a role in dramatic action..

## **act acts (noun)**

Divisions of dramatic texts; acts can be further divided into scenes which in strict usage are bound by the entry and exit of characters. The terms *act* and *scene* are used more loosely in current practice but continue to provide specific structuring markers for drama scripts and texts.

Main divisions of plays, ballets operas, television shows and films.

Acts are often used to show a change of tone, place, time.

They can also be used to show a break in the action or plot development.

Act and acts are terms linked to the overall dramatic structure of a play.

The term is also used to describe the individual performances or different sections of variety shows or cabaret.

See also *actor, acting, mimesis, script, scene, dramatic structure*

## **acting**

Drawing on elements of play, drama, theatre and performance to shape role and dramatic action for an audience. Acting has elements in common with play such as inventiveness, imagination and creativity. It also involves technical expertise, physical capacity, mental and emotional commitment and aesthetic understanding. Acting is a blending of technical and personal and inspirational elements through the personality and experience of individuals actors.

## Classical Greek drama and theatre

Often considered the foundation of Western European drama, Greek drama is thought to have been derived from religious festivals, drawing on elements of ritual, known stories and themes and the use of enactment and mimicry.

Greek drama is characterised by the use of masks, choral vocal work and movement; it was performed by male actors and focused on powerful characters, plots and themes; performed in large outdoor theatres as part of festivals.

Most probably derived from Dionysian festivals:

*Lenaia*: domestic (no foreigners or strangers) festival held during January; involved a phallic procession and a Komos; drama probably introduced in 442 BC with an emphasis on comedy.

*Anthesteria*: held during February linked to rebirth of the new seasons and invocation to the dead .

*The Rural Dionysia*: important precursor to City Dionysia and Lenaia; variable dates; touring companies of actors performed for these festivals; celebrated by the whole family including slaves, involved processional revels, phallus and games such as askoliasmes - jumping on inflatable goatskins.

*The City Dionysia*: largest of all festivals, including processions headed by girl carrying phallus and goat (tragedy is sometimes translated as "goat song"); main dramatic festival lasted five days; three tragic poets were selected and each staged three tragedies and one satyr play each day. The other two days were performances of dithyrambic chorus - a chorus of five boys on one day and five men on the other. In the evenings a comedy was performed. At the end of the competition, performances were judged and winners crowned in the theatre.

The birth of Greek drama is linked to the large scale dithyramps - dances with vocal chanted or spoken accompaniment - and the point where one performer steps out from the dithyramb and established a sense of character; this is attributed to the actor, Thespis.

The major forms of Greek drama are comedy and tragedy. Nietzsche, who was a German playwright and critic in the 19th century, saw Greek tragedy as a balance between Apollonian and Dionysian elements in drama.

*agon*: a debate between protagonist and antagonist on the relative merits of the thesis or key idea of the play

*anagnorisis*: the discovery or recognition scene

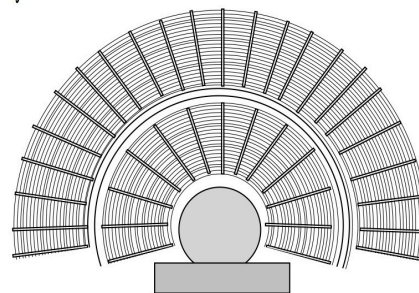
*antagonist*: the character who is a foil to the protagonist, providing the obstacle or opposing force against which the protagonist must work

*buskin*: a thick-soled boot worn by actors in Greek tragedy to give their character added height and therefore status; also called *cothurnos*

*catharsis*: a feeling of cleansing or purging that an audience experiences through having shared with the characters in tragedy feelings of fear and pity as the dramatic action has unfolded

*choregeus*: the wealthy citizen who was selected as the producer of drama for the festivals; this was a highly prestigious position but it also carried with it the financial burden of having to pay for the training of the chorus and for their costumes

Open air amphitheatre



not to scale

### Features of Classical Greek auditorium:

- open air
- built in stone
- examples of seating (kerkis) and orchestra remain today but details of sken, stage machinery and parados are sketchy and conjectural

### Mathematical relationships in Classical Greek theatre architecture are significant:

- at Epidaurus, the lower section has 34 rows, the upper section has 21 - which is the ratio of 34 to 21 or 1.618, the ruling number in the Golden Mean
- the ratio of the total number of rows (55) to 34 is also 1.618
- 55 is the sum of the first ten numbers
- 21 is the sum of the numbers 1 through 6
- 34 is the sum of the numbers 7 through 10

*deus ex machina*: a machine or crane that lowered an actor playing a god into the action so that plot complications could be unravelled and the denouement of the play set in motion; in modern usage, the term is used for a theatrical trick or coup de theatre which sets actors free from impossible plot complications and situations. Latin term translated literally as the "god from the machine"

*deuteragonist*: the second character added to Greek drama; where before there had been only protagonist and chorus, the addition made it possible for characters to enter into dialogue

*dithyramb*: a hymn or song of praise sung by a chorus in honour of Dionysus; the hymn was based on an episode from the life of the god and is the basis of drama; at some stage in the development of drama, the leader of the chorus stepped forward and became the protagonist setting up the dialogue between chorus and protagonist

*eccyclema*: a moveable platform carrying a tableau of actors depicting offstage action episodes: sections of dramatic action and dialogue that alternate with choral odes

*epode*: the third and last part of a choral ode

*hamartia*: an error or sin, the fatal flaw in a protagonist that sets in motion the dramatic action in tragedy; for example, pride, poor judgement, etc

*hubris*: overweening pride, a particular type of hamartia, and cause of many a downfall of the protagonist in tragedy

*New Comedy*: major form of Greek drama (about 330-150 BC);

## comedy/comedies

Pleasant, humorous, light natured, amusing drama; in contrast to tragedy which shows the serious, the life threatening and the gravely consequential, comedy is generally light-hearted, generous-spirited and typified by a return to order and harmony, whatever disruptions there may have been. Not all comedy is inconsequential or frivolous; comedy may provoke thought, underline grave injustices or disruptions of world views (absurdist comedy, black comedy); comedy makes use of devices such as stock characters, well-known comic routines and business, jokes, gags, slapstick, wit and fast-paced exchanges of dialogue (*stichomythia*).

Comedy may also be used in more serious drama, to provide a release of tension - comic relief - that serves to further heighten tension as the dramatic action unfolds.

There are many different sorts of comedy and each has its own characteristics.

Different theories contrast different approaches to comedy (and tragedy):

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Comedy built on vanity leading to exposure                     | Tragedy as guilt leading to atonement, forgiveness and reparation  |
| Comedy based on self-preservation and rhythms of individuality | Tragedy as self-consummation a living out of the <i>vegetation myth of growth, maturity, decline, decay, death, rebirth</i> as a continuing cycle. |

Comedy is a subtle and complex dramatic form. One way of classifying comedy is to identify characteristics according to differing purpose, method and tone.

|                              | Purpose   | Method   | Tone  |
|------------------------------|---|--|---|
| humorous comedy              | to understand and reveal human nature                   | focus on discrepancies in behaviour, personality, balance; laughing <b>with</b> characters                   | gentle, sympathetic, compassionate                  |
| satirical comedy             | to correct folly, to change manners, morality and ideas | use of wit, sarcasm, exaggeration; laughing <b>at</b> characters   | either mocking and savage or rational and objective |
| farcical comedy              | ridicule for laughter's sake                            | invention of improbable situations and excessive (over the top characters); laughing <b>for its own sake</b> | light, cynical, amoral                              |
| parody and caricature comedy | to parody other comedy (or tragedy)                     | exaggeration and excess; laughing <b>at</b> characters and the original source material                      | light, critical, ironic                             |

See also *burlesque, comedy of humours, comedy of manners, Commedia dell'arte, Fable'aitu, humorous plays, black comedy, comic timing, clowning, farce, high comedy, impersonation, Kkoktu kaksi, masque, performing arts, pratfall, skit, slapstick*

## comedy of humours

Drama that satirises character through building dramatic action in response to their dominant traits (or, in Elizabethan and Jacobean times, their humours); there were four main humours:

- choleric** (red; blood),
- phlegmatic** (white),
- melancholic** (black),
- sanguine** (yellow)

People of Elizabethan/Jacobean and similar times believed that these determined the nature of the characters: a balance of humours made for a "good humoured" character and an abundance or lack of a humour made for a "bad humoured" character. Names used were emblematic of humours and strictly defined their natures - Knowell, Ferret, Fly, Subtle, Brainworm, Bat Burst - in much the same way as stock characters or the *commedia* types are portrayed.

Plays by Ben Johnson (1572-1637) are frequently noted for their use of the comedy of humours: *Volpone* is seen as greedy and avaricious. *Everyman in his Humour*, as the title suggests, used this approach as the major focus.

See also *comedies, Elizabethan drama, humours*

## comedy of manners

Drama that satirises the manners and customs and habits of a section of society.

Examples;

- Congreve (1670 – 1729) *The Way of the World*
- Sheridan (1751-1816) *The Rivals*
- Wilde (1854-1900) *Lady Windemere's Fan*

See also *comedy/comedies, Restoration drama/theatre*

## comic timing

In comedy timing has to do with the use of pause, emphasis and "pointing" key words in a line; it also refers to riding through the laughter of an audience to deliver the next line at the most appropriate point so that comic effect is sustained and not dampened.

See also *comedy, timing*

## commedia dell'arte

An improvisationally-based form of comic theatre with plots and comic situations probably derived from Roman comedy and using a cast of stock characters including Arlecchino (Harlequin), Columbine, Pantaloon, Scaramouche; the players appear masked and in costumed that became conventions of this genre; a feature of *commedia* is the use of set pieces of comic business called *lazzi*.

See also *comedy/comedies, improvisation, Italian drama, physical theatre*

## communication

Imparting and sharing information with people.

See also *nonverbal communication, oral communication, visual communication*

## community theatre

Popular non-professional theatre movement influential in many parts of the world. The tradition of non-professional theatre has forerunners in the guilds performing mystery plays.

There are at least two types of community theatre: