Part I focuses on ways of understanding theatre, ways usually called theory and criticism. **Theory** is an attempt to explain the nature of something and tries to answer such fundamental questions as what is it and how does it work? **Criticism** develops a considered judgment or discussion about the qualities of a specific play or performance. What does this particular play mean and how does it convey that meaning by its form and structure? How does this particular production present the play to this audience? Why were these particular choices about acting, directing, and design made? How does this production try to communicate its ideas to the audience? How well did it succeed? Part I ends by considering some of the people who use theory and criticism as they work with and in today’s theatre.
When you have completed this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define *performance* and list traits shared by performances.
- Define *art* and list traits shared by arts.
- Discuss how theatre differs from other kinds of performance (e.g., lectures, games, parades, and rituals).
- Discuss how theatre differs from other kinds of arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, opera, and dance).
- Discuss, using specific examples, similarities and differences between art and life; performance and life; dramatic character and real person; dramatic character and actor; performing art and visual art; and performing art and sport.
- List and explain the traits that constitute theatre.
- Explain in what sense theatre is a system of relationships (rather than a thing).
- Explain how theatre resembles and yet differs from film and television.
WHY THEATRE?
People choose to go to the theatre for many reasons. Theatre’s immediacy, relevance, and engagement appeal to people in many different ways simultaneously. Part of theatre’s appeal is social: It’s a good place to be part of a great event. Part of its appeal is sensuous because theatre pleases the senses through the talent of its actors, the spectacle of its visual display (i.e., scenery, costumes, and lighting), and the beauty of its language and music. It appeals, too, by engaging the imagination with its stories and characters, which offer us experiences we have never had—and may never have—but which we recognize as possible: exotic yet familiar, good and evil, funny and sad. And theatre appeals intellectually because it engages the audience with relevant issues. The immediacy of theatre is exciting because it is happening now right in front of us, not recorded and projected for us to view.

Theatre is both a performance and an art. Most of today’s theoretical work sees theatre as a kind of performance; previous theories saw it as a kind of art. Both views are correct. By shifting between the two perspectives, we can understand more about the theatre than would be possible from either standpoint alone.

THEATRE AS PERFORMANCE
An activity in which some people do something while other people watch is a performance.

Many different kinds of performance exist on a continuum from humdrum and everyday to formal and special. People perform in everyday life—that is, they shift their actions, and sometimes even their appearance, depending on what they are doing and for whom. For example, they might dress and behave one way when applying for a loan but dress and behave differently when competing in a triathlon. They may perform many informal roles in life—student, parent, athlete, and consumer. These informal roles are constantly shifting because people change their behavior for other people in certain situations.

On the other hand, some performances in life are formal and clearly structured and may

FIGURE 1.1
Street Performance
Theatrical moments abound around the world. The leaning statue performs in Chicago; the mud couple performs in Madrid, Spain. No matter where the street performers work, they create a makeshift stage in hopes of earning money.
seem even more special because they do not happen every day. In performances such as religious services and weddings, there are usually agreed-on sequences of events and predetermined sets of words. In games and sports, there are rules that must be followed and time constraints that must be observed. More highly structured still are such performances as circuses and fairs, where people come together on special occasions as an audience to watch trained people do things for their enjoyment. Most formal of all are performances of the sort found in theatre, opera, and dance because in these instances, people gather to watch specially trained people perform in highly structured works of art—hence the name performing arts to describe this special group.

**Traits Shared by Performances**

All performances, both informal and formal, share certain traits. They have:

- Doers (performers, actors)
- Something done (a speech, ritual, or play)
- Watchers (spectators, audiences)
- Performance sites (a stadium, church, theatre, or street)
- Movement through time (beginnings and endings)

In a fight between spectators at a hockey game, the fighters are the doers (performers or actors); fighting is the something done; the crowd that turns its attention from the ice to watch the fight is the audience, the watchers, or spectators; the performance site is the stands where the fight is taking place. The fight begins and ends. The fighters are rarely self-aware that they are performing. In a theatrical performance, the actors do a play for an audience, usually in a theatre building, and the performance takes time.

**Immediate and Ephemeral**

The relationship between the doers and the watchers leads to one of performance’s greatest appeals—its immediacy. Because it happens in real time, with the performer and spectators brought together in the event, performance has a compelling sense of “now.”

The same interaction that gives live performance this power of immediacy, however, also makes it ephemeral—fleeting, nonrecoverable. In performances, as in life, events happen and are gone, never to be recaptured. Although a storyteller (another kind of performer) may repeat a story for different audiences, the storyteller is a human being and not a machine. For this reason, each time a storyteller works, the performance is different. No matter how hard a performer might work to make each performance identical, the performer cannot succeed because audiences affect performance, and audiences change at every performance.

An exception to this generalization is when performances exist in such media as radio, film, television, and video. Recorded performances exist physically on film stock as images or as electronic impulses and can be recovered exactly as they were made and repeated unchanged many times. Live performances do not leave a record. Exact copies do not exist. They cannot be played again and again without change. When the moment in performance is gone, it is entirely gone. Thus, performance is ephemeral.
Traits Causing Differences among Performances

Different types of performances, although sharing some traits, do not share all; that is, performances are not identical. They differ according to their:

- **Purposes (the reasons for which they are done)**
  Church services are held so that people can worship; games, so that someone can win; auctions, so that people can exchange goods and money.

- **Relationships between doers and watchers**
  At spectator sports, the watchers (fans) interact often with one another—talking, buying drinks—but they seldom interact with the players, except indirectly, to scream at a player’s mistake or to cheer for a score. At a parade, on the other hand, watchers interact often and directly—waving and smiling. Spectators may watch for a while or even leave to do other things, coming back only in time to catch the end of the parade. In a recorded performance (radio, film, TV), performers and spectators aren’t even at the same site: They don’t occupy the same time or place and so cannot interact.

- **Organizing principles (the reasons performances begin and end and seem all to be part of the same event)**
  Auctions are organized by the things to be bought and sold; they begin when the auctioneer holds up the first item for sale and end when the last item has been sold. Church services are organized neither by rules nor by items to be sold but by a schedule determined by custom, symbolism, and doctrine.

**FIGURE 1.2**

**Film**

Film, like theatre, often uses actors and scripts; unlike theatre, it gives its audiences projected images, not actual people. Film, unlike theatre, can be shown repeatedly without change. Technology and economics for many years meant that most people experienced film as a member of an audience, sitting in a darkened movie theatre. Now many people watch film in their own homes through electronic media.
- Self-awareness (the degree to which the people involved know they are at a performance and why)

In street fights, spectators do not come together purposefully; they encounter the fight by accident. But people come to a boxing match or circus specifically to watch trained people perform. Boxing matches and circuses, then, are self-aware in a way that street fights are not.

Obviously, none of these traits (i.e., purposes, relationships, organizing principles, and self-awareness) is better than another; each is simply different, and from different combinations of these differences come different types of performances. A final, extended example of one kind of performance—ritual—may clarify how traits can combine differently to produce a kind of performance.

Rituals share many elements across cultures. They often incorporate such elements as masks, costumes, dance, music, and some sort of text, although the texts may be improvised and transmitted orally rather than in writing. Rituals usually have as their purpose some sort of cultural outcome—to heal, to honor, to mourn. An identifying element is the community bonding of those present; that is, one of the results of a ritual is to bind members of a community together. Such bonding is probably enhanced because ritual lacks any clear separation between performers and audience—those attending participate regularly and directly in the activities. Some rituals accomplish things within the belief system of the celebrants. For example, in many Christian churches, the ritual of baptism is a prerequisite for the subject’s soul to enter heaven after death. In addition, rituals sometimes lack a dedicated space and can take place over an extended period of time.

THEATRE AS ART

In addition to being a kind of performance, theatre is also a kind of art. Just as there are many different kinds of performances, there are many different kinds of art—poetry, novel, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, and theatre, to mention only the most obvious.

Traits Shared by Arts

Just as all performances share some traits, all arts, however different they may be in some ways, share certain traits. For example, all art:

- Is artificial
  That is, art is made rather than natural (existing in nature). This idea is at first difficult to grasp because we often prize art for how closely it resembles nature, thrilling to a portrait or a painting precisely because it so closely resembles the thing it copies. Still, an artist makes art; it does not just happen.

- Stands alone
  Art may have but does not need any practical use in real life. An advertising jingle may be arresting and tuneful, but it is not normally considered a work of art, because its purpose is to sell something. For many, a piano sonata has no practical use in the world and may not even be hummable, but it is an example of musical art.
Is self-aware
Artists know in a general way what they are trying to do, and they possess a preparation and a discipline that allow them, within limits, to accomplish what they attempt.

Produces a certain kind of response
The response is aesthetic: An aesthetic response includes an appreciation of beauty and some understanding that goes beyond the merely intellectual or the merely entertaining.

**Traits Causing Differences among Arts**
Although all arts share certain traits, they also differ in certain ways, and it is these differences that allow us to distinguish among the kinds of art. Arts differ in:

- **Their relationship with time and space**
  Some arts unfold through time; for example, music or novels require time to move from their beginnings to their endings. Other arts exist in space. A building or a piece of sculpture occupies space and does not move from a beginning to an end over time; it is best seen when a person walks around it, looking at it from several sides.

- **Their principles of organization**
  Some arts are organized by stories; in them, lifelike characters seem to be thinking and talking and doing things that appear to be much the way people do them in real life. Other arts do not use stories but instead are organized by patterned sounds (music) or patterned colors (painting).

- **Their idea of audience**
  Novels and paintings, for example, assume they will be enjoyed by solitary individuals; opera and dance, on the other hand, assume that groups of people will assemble to enjoy them. The ways by which arts reach their audiences also differ.

- **Their mode of presentation**
  Some arts, such as novels, are transmitted by the printed page; others, like film, rely on mechanically produced images; still others, like opera, dance, and theatre, require live performers in the presence of a live audience.
In short, theatre is a kind of performance that shares some traits with other sorts of performances: It has doers and watchers, a place of performance, and movement through time; it is immediate and ephemeral. Although resembling other kinds of performances, it is not identical with any of them; it has its own purposes, relationships, principles, degree of self-awareness, and relation to time.

**Theatre’s Relationship with Other Arts**

Theatre’s relationship with other arts is complex. Sometimes it contains them, other times it merges with them, and often it transforms other arts for its own purposes (and vice versa). Scenery and costumes routinely use techniques of painting and sculpture, and plays so often include songs and dances that we have the expressions *theatre music* and *theatre dance*. Works such as *Porgy and Bess* or *Sweeney Todd* so completely merge opera with musical theatre that they are performed by both theatre companies and opera companies, and songs such as “The Impossible Dream” become famous simply as songs, having lost all association with the play in which they first appeared, in this case the 1965 musical *The Man of La Mancha*.

Sometimes, too, the same story rests at the center of several different arts. *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, has been staged as a play, a ballet, an opera, several films, and *West Side Story*, a Broadway musical. In each case, the artists made quite different choices, selecting from *Romeo and Juliet* those elements that could be best communicated through their own art. For opera, the composer selected those moments best communicated through music; for dance, the choreographer selected the moments best communicated through movement; and so on. Such choices focus the audience’s attention in different ways.

Shakespeare’s play leads us to watch and listen to the actor speak Shakespeare’s poetic dialogue, but opera leads us to listen to the music, perhaps barely following the story, and dance may ask us to watch movement only, almost ignoring story and character. All three invite the eye.

Theatre, then, resembles other arts in being artificial and self-aware and in intending to evoke an aesthetic response rather than to produce an immediately useful item. It differs from other arts in its relation to time and space, its principles of organization, its anticipated audience, and its mode of presentation, and it has a complicated relationship with many other arts.

**THEATRE AS PERFORMING ART**

From what we have examined about theatre as a particular kind of performance and a special kind of art, we can now say more about the major characteristics of theatre.

- Theatre uses a special kind of performer—the actor.

  An actor is a performer who impersonates, that is, who uses the pronoun *I* and means somebody other than himself or herself. Thus, actors differ from street fighters, for example, who neither intend to perform nor pretend to be someone other than themselves. Actors differ even from jugglers and music video stars, who do not say *I* and mean someone other than themselves.
Spotlight

Life/Art/Performance: Frost/Nixon

Are David Frost and Richard Nixon in Frost/Nixon the real Frost and Nixon?

President Richard Nixon resigned in disgrace in 1974 over the crime called “Watergate.” In 1977, the British journalist David Frost interviewed Nixon on television about his presidency—many hours of tape were cut down to four 90-minute shows. In 2006, dramatist Peter Morgan turned the story of those interviews into a play, Frost/Nixon. In 2008, director Ron Howard turned the play into a film, using Morgan’s script and the same two actors who had played Frost and Nixon in London and New York.

A chain of life, art, and performance was thus forged: Hours of interviews were shaped into four TV shows; the televised interviews and their backgrounds were turned into a play; and the play was turned into a movie. At the heart of the play was what National Public Radio critic Bob Mondello called “a David and Goliath mismatch” based on the idea that Frost was a TV lightweight; Nixon a power hitter: “It could almost have been called Froth-Nixon.” It also, according to Ben Brantley of the New York Times, “blithely rejiggered and rearranged facts and chronology,” including “the show’s high point, a late-night phone call Frost receives from a drunken Nixon” (which was a “pure fabrication”).

Howard’s film used Morgan’s script but was seen as different from the play. Manohla Dargis, also from the New York Times, found it “a talkathon embellished with camera movements.” Mondello, however, cited Howard’s “semi-documentary approach, [which] has the effect of giving Frost more heft on screen. . . .” To Mondello, it was less the supposedly lightweight Frost who brought Nixon to near-tears and a near-admission of guilt than television itself—“that unblinking eye. . . .” He pointed out that the play made the same point intellectually, but the film made it visually and in close-ups, “theater being a medium of words, and film a medium of images. . . .”

There is no question that the original interviews, the play, and the film were effective. Quotes such as “theatrical smackdown,” “briskly entertaining,” and “the aura of a boxing bout” were used. Supposedly real events, therefore, were turned into successful art, both theatrical and cinematic, in which “larger-than-life seems truer-to-life than merely life-size ever could” (Brantley).

But were the televised interviews of 1977 “real” events, or were they, too, art? Surely the winnowing of thirty hours to six hours comprised manipulation, compression, pointing, and “dramatizing,” hence making it art.

Were, then, the unedited thirty hours of taped interviews the “reality?” Were Frost and Nixon any less performers in them than the actors in the film and the play? Both Frost and Nixon were paid well for those hours; both had reputations at stake. When were they not performing? Were they ever in their adult lives not performing? Where in the chain of life, art, and performance was their “reality”?
In theatre, live actors perform in the presence of a live audience. A live actor in the sense used here is not the opposite of a dead actor but rather an actor who is in the physical presence of the audience. Thus, theatre actors differ not only from other kinds of performers but also from other kinds of actors. Theatre actors differ from actors in film or television, for example, because in those media the picture or image of the actor (rather than the actual actor) is offered to the audience.

Theatre actors must both impersonate and be physically present because it is these two traits—impersonation and presence—that separate them from various other performers, on the one hand, and from actors in other media, on the other.

Theatre is both immediate and ephemeral. Because in theatre actors and audiences share both space and time, theatre is both an immediate and ephemeral art: that is, it has a strong sense of now, and it cannot be repeated exactly.

Theatre depends on action (which for now we can think of as stories and characters) to organize and bind the theatrical event. We can think of stories as worlds created for artistic purposes, worlds that resemble (but are distinct from) the actual world in which we live: virtual worlds, an expression that recalls the invented worlds of the computer’s virtual reality. Part of the reason that theatre’s virtual worlds resemble our own real world so convincingly is that these virtual worlds are inhabited by characters. Characters might be thought of as virtual people because characters are artistic creations intended to resemble people. Well-created characters are often so compelling, so lifelike, that we feel as though we know them personally. We may even begin to talk of them as though they were real people. But characters are not real people; they are created by a playwright for the play, just as any virtual world is created.

Theatre’s virtual world is more intense and concentrated than the world in which we live. Because everything on stage has been selected and placed there by someone for a purpose, everything on stage is important—it has meaning for an
audience. Therefore, everything on stage gains a significance that it may lack in real life. For example, it is not unusual for theatre audiences to be captivated by an onstage scene in which an actor cooks a meal or uses a washing machine. Obviously, cooking or using a washing machine is not very interesting in real life, but, on stage, these simple actions can provide insight because theatre transforms them from ordinary to meaningful activities.

■ The theatre uses a real performance space but usually with artificial (that is, made-for-the-purpose) settings.

Theatre uses a defined performance space that is physically in the presence of the audience and limited by existing architecture. It can give us representations—replicas—of actual places (e.g., a city street), but it can give them only on a scale appropriate to its own performing space and to the actors working in or in front of the scene. Film, on the other hand, can take us anywhere and show us images of actual places, even on a vast scale (the Grand Canyon, outer space). Because film shows images of places rather than real places, it can range far in its presentation of objects and spaces.

Many kinds of activities easily shown on film (horse races, car crashes) are difficult to present on stage. Film and television can show not only races and crashes but also selective close-ups that direct our attention and heighten the impact of the events: speeding hooves, snorting nostrils, exploding gas tanks, collapsing fenders. Theatre has no exact equivalent to film’s close-up on stage, but theatre can heighten focus by the use of staging, lighting, and sound.

Theatre audiences love spectacle, like horse races presented on stage, even though they know they are seeing an obvious trick; they seem to appreciate the skill required to create the illusion. Indeed, it is one of theatre’s paradoxes that the restrictions of theatre’s real space seem to increase the audience’s enjoyment of difficult scenes produced there.

■ Theatre proceeds at its own pace through time.

We can’t play a performance again, play it backward, or fast-forward it to see how it will come out. We can’t put a theatrical performance aside for

**FIGURE 1.5**

**Choices**

Artists make choices that sometimes seem unusual. Although realistic approaches are often seen on stage, this production of *Big Love* from Virginia Commonwealth University made abstract choices.
a while and pick it up later. If we don’t like a performance, we cannot jump to another station or change channels. If we don’t understand a moment in the theatre, we cannot stop and go back to it, hoping to grasp its significance the second or third time through. In other words, as members of a theatre audience, we do not control the way the theatrical performance unfolds as we can control the pace at which we watch a DVD or read a poem or a book. For better or worse, the theatre performance proceeds at its own pace and must be followed at that pace. Some audience members find the lack of interruption or replay a significant part of theatre’s attraction.

Theatre is not a thing (an object) but a process, a system of constantly altering relationships among actor, action, audience, time, and space.

Changing even one of these relationships changes the whole. We might be tempted to think, for example, that a play in the theatre and a play on film have only mechanical differences, but a filmed play has no live actor and can be stopped and replayed, and the camera “sees” for the audience. These changed performance-audience relationships change the whole process.

Theatre is lifelike, but it is not life.

Because theatre is an art, it is artificial—made by artists. Theatre’s artificiality, however, is sometimes more difficult to see than the artificiality of other arts because theatre is also a performance. Theatre uses real human beings pretending to be other human beings engaged in actions that look much like those we see in life. So convincing is it that sometimes people have confused a theatre performance with real life. There are many apparently true stories about people attending their first play who have rushed on stage to save a character who is being threatened, like the man who tried to save Desdemona from Othello.
Theatre in fact sometimes seems so lifelike that it has often been used as a metaphor for life. The most famous example of the metaphor is probably Shakespeare’s “All the world’s a stage / and all the men and women merely players,” but there are others, such as “This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.” We need to remember, however, that a metaphor is a special kind of comparison, one that implies but does not use the words like or as. We know that the real sense of these quotations is that the world is like a comedy or like a tragedy. And, clearly, the metaphor comparing life and theatre cuts two ways, equating the stage with the real world and at the same time pointing out how individuals’ qualities change over time, making one person seem like many people.

Life and theatre move forward through time. Just as life has a past, a present, and a future, plays have a beginning, middle, and end, and in plays, as in life, these stages are defined through time. Life and theatre exist in space; that is, like actors on a stage men and women in life take up space and move through space. Life and theatre have men and women doing and saying things: While some people act and speak, others listen and watch. Those who act and speak in life are like actors in the theatre, whereas those who listen and watch in life are like audiences in the theatre. And the lives of real people that we know often don’t seem different from the actions or stories that we see when we go to a play.

Despite such similarities, however, life and theatre are different in many ways, only a few of which need be suggested. Most lives last for years; most theatre lasts a few hours. Life often seems diffuse, confused, and inexplicable; theatre appears concentrated, orderly, and meaningful. Life may be dangerous, but theatre is safe. Although theatre may bring us up close to a human activity (like a murder) that is terrifyingly like life in its immediacy, we as audience are separated from it and so can watch it in safety and experience it without physical danger.

KEY TERMS
Check your understanding against this list. Brief definitions are included in the Glossary; persons are page-referenced in the Index.

- aesthetic response 7
- art 6
- audience 4
- characters 10
- criticism 1
- ephemeral art 10
- impersonation 10
- performance 3
- performing arts 4
- presence 10
- ritual 6
- theory 1