



Glossary of dramatic and theatrical terms

Cambridge International AS & A Level Drama 9482

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Dramatic and theatrical terms

This glossary is not exhaustive and is intended as a guide. The glossary is in two sections:

- **General terms** – terms that are representative of those used in mainstream theatre practice
- **Specialist technical terms** – terms that are used by specialists in lighting and sound.

The terms in both sections are ordered alphabetically. Unless specified, local or regional variations have not been provided.

General terms

| General terms | What it means |
|--------------------------|--|
| Acting area | The space in which the actor may move in full view of the audience. Also known as the <i>playing area</i> or <i>performance space</i> . |
| Acting style | A particular way of acting that reflects cultural and historical influences, for example naturalistic, melodramatic, comedic. |
| Action | The movement or development of the plot or story in a play; this could be created by passage of time or character motivation. Action is also commonly used to refer to the activity on the stage at a given moment or in a scene, although strictly this refers to film rather than live theatre. |
| Adaptation | A play that has been created using material from another artistic medium such as a novel, short story or poem. |
| Analysis | The process of examining how the elements of practical drama relate to each other in performance. |
| Alienation effect | Theatrical techniques designed to remind the audience that they are watching a play, and so distance them from identifying emotionally with the characters and events depicted. Examples might include the use of placards or back projections that comment on the action, or actors who step out of character to address the audience directly about the issues raised in the drama. Central to the dramatic theories of Bertolt Brecht. See also verfremdungseffekt . |
| Animation | Live action sequence used as part of a play's special effects, often in an interactive way. |
| Antagonist | The opponent or adversary of the hero or main character of a drama; one who opposes and actively competes with another character in a play, most often with the protagonist . |
| Apron | The apron is any part of the stage that extends past the proscenium arch and into the audience or seating area. See also thrust . |
| Arena stage | Type of stage without a frame or arch separating the stage from the auditorium, in which the audience surrounds the stage area. See also theatre-in-the-round . |

| General terms | What it means |
|-------------------------|---|
| Articulation | Clarity or distinctness of speech. |
| Aside | Lines spoken by an actor to the audience that are not supposed to be overheard by other characters on stage. |
| Auditorium | The part of a theatre, concert hall, or other space in which the audience sits. Audience configuration refers to the placing of the audience in relation to the performing space. |
| Back projection | A method of projecting images onto a translucent screen from behind. Often used for projected scenery or special effects. |
| Backdrop | A flat surface, the width of the stage, on which a scenic design is painted or projected. It is hung upstage of the acting area; sometimes also called a <i>backcloth</i> . See also cyclorama . |
| Beat | A momentary pause or delay in which there is a subtle shift in mood, thought or feeling. See pause . |
| Black box | A one-room theatre, without a proscenium arch; interior is painted black, including walls, floor and ceiling, and any drapes are also black. Typically used for small-scale studio productions. |
| Blackout | A lighting cue where all stage lights go off simultaneously. Often used to signal the end of a scene. |
| Blocking | A traditional term used to describe the path traced by an actor's movement on stage, including entrances and exits. It is usually determined by the director with assistance from the actor, and often noted in the script during rehearsal. See also staging . |
| Box set | A set with three walls leaving the fourth wall to be imagined. The box set can represent a real room with doors and windows that work. |
| Brechtian | Drama influenced by the theory and practice of the twentieth century German theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht. |
| Business | Physical activity used to show character, fill a pause in dialogue, or establish a scene. It is often unscripted or improvised and sometimes comic in intention. A playwright may suggest 'business' to indicate the need for some activity at that point in the performance. |
| Catharsis | One aspect of Aristotle's theory of tragedy , which attempts to describe the feeling of release felt by the audience at the end of a tragedy ; the audience experiences catharsis, or is set free from the emotional hold of the action , after experiencing strong emotions and sharing in the protagonist's troubles. |
| Character | A person portrayed in a scripted or devised play, novel, or other artistic piece. |
| Characterisation | How an actor uses body, voice and thought to develop and portray a character. |
| Choreography | The organised movement of actors and dancers, often to music. |

| General terms | What it means |
|------------------------|---|
| Choral speech | A group or ensemble speaking together in one voice. It often involves using combinations of different or contrasting voices to bring out meaning or tonal qualities in a text. |
| Chorus | A group of performers who sing, dance, or recite in unison. In Greek drama, the chorus was the group of performers who sang and danced between episodes, narrated off-stage action, and commented on events. |
| Climax | The point of greatest intensity in a series or progression of events in a play, often forming the turning point of the plot and leading to some kind of resolution . See also exposition and dénouement . |
| Cloth | A piece of painted or plain scenic canvas. A <i>backcloth</i> (or backdrop) hangs at the rear of a scene. A <i>floorcloth</i> or <i>stagecloth</i> is a painted canvas sheet placed on the stage floor to mark out the acting area, or to achieve a particular effect. |
| Comedy | A play that treats characters and situations in a humorous way. In Shakespeare's time, a comedy typically revolved around complex relationships and potentially disastrous situations but with a happy ending. In Ancient Greece, comedies dealt almost exclusively with contemporary figures and problems. <i>Low comedy</i> is physical rather than intellectual comedy; <i>high comedy</i> is more sophisticated, emphasising verbal wit more than physical action. |
| Comic relief | A break in the tension of a play provided by a comic character, a comic episode, or even a comic line. |
| Composite set | A set that contains more than one location. |
| Concentration | The actor's focus, also called <i>centring</i> ; focusing on the work at hand, being in character, or being in the moment . |
| Conflict | The internal or external struggle between opposing forces, ideas, or interests that creates dramatic tension. |
| Contrast | Dynamic use of opposites or significant differences to create dramatic effect. Examples of 'opposites' might include movement/stillness, sound/silence, and light/darkness. 'Significant differences' might include distinct styles or colour of costumes, or styles of dialogue . |
| Curtain | [stage direction] In older theatres, an instruction to lower the curtain, signalling to the audience that the play (or a scene within the play) has finished. |
| Cyclorama | A fabric drop hung from a curved or segmented bar, or a curved wall at the back of the stage, upon which light can be cast to create effects (cyc for short). |
| Dénouement | The moment in a play when the essential plot point is unravelled or explained, and the tensions that have driven the drama are resolved. See also climax , exposition and resolution . |
| Design elements | A general term to refer to props, costume, set, lighting and sound. |

| General terms | What it means |
|------------------------|---|
| Deus ex machina | A person, object or event that appears suddenly and without prior introduction at the play's climax and saves the situation, often implausibly. The term comes from ancient Greek and Roman drama, when an actor playing a god or goddess would be lowered onto the stage by a ' <i>mechane</i> ' (crane). |
| Development | Progression of the plot or conflict in a play. |
| Devised drama | Drama that is developed through collaboration to create an original piece of work. It may derive from a range of starting points and use techniques of improvisation. The devising process refers to the collective shaping and structuring of the devised piece. It will often involve research, sharing of ideas, drafting of material and practical experimentation, leading to a working script or outline of the piece. |
| Dialectics | Drama in which characters offer two or more opposing points of view on social or political issues and seek to establish the truth through reasoned discourse. Central to Brechtian theatre. |
| Dialogue | Spoken conversation used by two or more characters to express thoughts, feelings and attitudes. |
| Director | The person responsible for deciding the artistic interpretation of a performance of a play; they work with actors and designers to bring their vision to the stage. A director will usually decide on staging or blocking , and will guide or assist actors in developing an effective performance of their role. |
| Downstage | A position nearer the audience or at the front of the stage. See also upstage . |
| Drama | The making and performing of plays; drama involves the acting out of a story to an audience, and the deliberate shaping of the story to have an effect on the audience. |
| Duration | The time during which something continues. |
| Dynamics | Variations in levels of energy, physical movement, pace or emotional intensity in a scene. Also used in technical theatre to describe the difference between levels of sound. |
| End on | Traditional audience seating layout where the audience is facing the stage from the same direction. This seating layout is that of a proscenium arch theatre. See also theatre-in-the-round , thrust , traverse . |
| Ensemble | An approach to theatre-making that focuses on the combined output of all the members of a group of performers working together, rather than emphasising individual performances. |
| Epic theatre | Brechtian dialectical theatre in which the performers often interrupt the story line to address the audience directly with commentary or argument. 'Epic' in this context is not connected with the scale or scope of the drama. |
| Epilogue | See prologue . |
| Exposition | The part of a play that introduces the theme, main characters and current situation in the story. See also climax , dénouement and resolution . |

| General terms | What it means |
|--------------------------|--|
| Expressionism | A highly influential style of non-naturalistic theatre that developed in Germany in the early twentieth century. Its characteristics include a dream-like atmosphere, fragmented or declamatory dialogue , stylised movement, minimalist sets and heightened emotional intensity. Characters are representational types or caricatures rather than individuals. Visual elements are often distorted or grotesque. |
| Falling action | The parts of a plot which occur after the climax but before the end of the play. Often experienced as part of the resolution and dénouement . |
| Farce | An extreme form of comedy that depends on quick tempo and flawless timing and is characterised by improbable events and far-fetched coincidences; from the French meaning 'to stuff'. |
| Flashback | In a non-linear plot , to go back in time to a previous event; a <i>flash forward</i> would move the action into the future. |
| Flat | A wooden frame, usually covered with painted cloth, used to create walls or separations on stage. |
| Focus | In acting, the act of concentrating or staying in character. It is also used to refer to the way actors and directors can direct the audience's attention to somebody or something on stage. In lighting, the adjustment of the size and shape of a beam of light and/or the direction in which it is aimed. |
| Forum theatre | Theatre in which the audience is invited to step into the drama and show how they would change the outcome of a given situation. Created by the Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal. See Theatre of the Oppressed . |
| Fourth wall | The illusion of an invisible wall of a set through which the audience sees the action of the play. <i>Breaking the fourth wall</i> refers to the moment when an actor directly addresses the audience through the fourth wall, breaking the illusion. |
| Genre | The type of drama, for example tragedy, comedy, satire, melodrama . |
| Gesture | Any movement of the actor's body that is used to convey meaning, attitude or feeling. |
| Gestus | Brechtian technique in which a gesture represents a social or political attitude rather than an emotion. |
| House lights | The lights that illuminate the auditorium before and after the performance and during intermission. |
| Imaging | A technique that allows performers to slow down and focus individually on an issue. The performers, sitting quietly with eyes closed, allow pictures to form in their minds. These images may be motivated by narration, music, sounds, smells, etc. |
| Immersive theatre | Theatre in which the stage is removed so that the audience can be immersed in the play, whether as witnesses to the action or participants. Often performed in unusual locations – see site-specific theatre, promenade theatre . |

| General terms | What it means |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Improvisation | The spontaneous and imaginative use of movement and speech to create a character or object in a particular situation and develop the scene. It is also a form of live theatre in which plot, characters and dialogue are made up on the spot, often based upon a suggestion from the audience. Often abbreviated to 'improv'. |
| Inflection | Change in pitch of the voice, specifically the way the voice rises and falls. A rising inflection is commonly used to indicate that the speaker is asking a question, while a falling inflection suggests a statement. Inflection may be used by an actor to communicate meaning and intention in dialogue. |
| Intensity | The measurable amount, levels or strength of a given property (for example sound, light, emotion). |
| Interaction | The action or relationship between two or more characters. |
| Irony | An implied discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. There are several forms of irony. <i>Verbal irony</i> is when a writer or speaker says one thing and means something else (often the opposite of what is said). <i>Dramatic irony</i> occurs when the audience know more than the characters on stage. <i>Situational irony</i> can be described as a discrepancy between what is expected and what actually happens. |
| Isolation | Control of isolated body parts; the ability to control or move one part of the body independently of the rest. |
| Kinaesthetic awareness | Resulting from the sensation of bodily position, presence, or movement. |
| Language | In drama, the particular way in which a character speaks. This could include accent, idiom, dialect, vocabulary or phrasing to suggest class, profession, culture or personality. |
| Levels | The height or the positioning of a character compared to others. Levels can also refer to parts of the set that have been elevated or lowered to vary the height of the playing space. |
| Light set | A term used to describe a situation where no physical set is used on stage. The 'set' is created entirely by means of lighting. |
| Magic if | A rehearsal technique developed by the Russian theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski to help actors create performances that are emotionally truthful. Performers ask themselves 'What would I do <i>if</i> I were in this situation?' and build the character accordingly. |
| Mannerism | A peculiarity of speech or behaviour. |
| Marking the moment | A dramatic technique used to highlight a key moment in a scene or improvisation. This can be done in a number of different ways, for example through slow-motion, tableau , narration, thought-tracking, lighting or music. |

| General terms | What it means |
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| Melodrama | A style of play which developed in the nineteenth century, relying heavily on sensationalism and sentimentality. Melodramas tend to feature action more than motivation, stock characters and a strict view of morality in which good triumphs over evil. Also central to the impact achieved by melodrama is the heightened use of music to underpin the action. |
| Metatheatre | Theatre that draws attention to its own theatricality in any way, for example by referring to or directly addressing the audience, acknowledging that the events depicted are fictional or that the characters are really actors. The device of a play-within-a-play is also an example of metatheatre, because it reminds the audience that they are watching a drama. |
| Mime | The art of portraying characters and acting out situations or creating narratives through gesture and body movement without the use of speech. |
| Minimalism | In theatre, a focus on the very simplest use of design with as few elements as possible. At its most extreme, a minimalist set might consist of only a chair. |
| Mirroring | Copying the movement and/or expression or look of someone else exactly. |
| Mise-en-scène | The way that scenery, décor, lighting, sound, props, costume, etc. have been deployed in the playing area to tell the story. |
| Moment | A very brief period of time in which there is a significant change in the drama. |
| Monologue | A long speech made by one actor; a monologue may be delivered alone or in the presence of others. Not to be confused with a soliloquy . |
| Mood | The atmosphere or feeling of a performance, often created by the music, setting or lighting. |
| Motif | Any element of the drama that is used repeatedly to convey symbolic meaning. Examples might be a gesture, a spoken phrase, a snatch of music or a technical effect. |
| Motivation | The reason(s) for a character's behaviour; an incentive or inducement for further action for a character. Often also referred to as a character's <i>objective</i> , i.e. what they want from the situation. |
| Movement | Stage blocking or the physical movements of the actors onstage during performance. Movement also refers to the action of the play as it moves from event to event. |
| Multimedia theatre | Theatre that blends digital techniques with live performance to tell the story, usually requiring live actors to interact with recorded images. Sometimes known as <i>digital theatre</i> . |
| Multi-roling | When an actor performs two or more roles within one play, characterising each one by changes in physicality, voice, costume, etc. while making it plain to the audience that the same performer is playing different parts. |
| Naturalism | A style of drama that developed in the late nineteenth century as an attempt to escape the artificial theatricality of contemporary forms of playwriting and acting. Its prime objective was to portray reality on stage. Its greatest exponent was Stanislavski. Naturalism evolved into realism . |

| General terms | What it means |
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| Non-naturalistic theatre | Any form of theatre that avoids representing an illusion of reality on stage, for example by the use of symbolic design, stylised performing, mask, audience interaction, fluid use of space, etc. |
| Non-verbal expression | Communicating feelings, responses or attitudes through gesture, physical movement, facial expression or sounds such as sighs or groans. |
| Pace | Rate of movement or speed of action, or the vocal delivery of the text. See tempo . |
| Parody | A mocking or satirical imitation of a literary or dramatic text or genre. |
| Pause | A short period of silence or stillness in a performance when the drama is communicated non-verbally. See beat . |
| Performer | Actors, singers, dancers, stand-up comedians, magicians, musicians are all examples of performers. Performers are seen by the audience and communicate the piece. They are often supported by many other (unseen) members of a theatre company, such as stage crew, technicians, designers, wardrobe staff, front of house, etc. |
| Physical theatre | Any style of drama where the emphasis is on movement rather than dialogue. |
| Physicality | The way in which an actor uses body language to convey character and intention. |
| Pitch | The particular level (high or low) of a voice, instrument or tune. |
| Plot | The sequence of events of a play or arrangement of action, as opposed to the theme . See also story line . |
| Plot development | The organisation or building of the action in a play. |
| Poor theatre | Influential style of drama developed by the Polish theatre practitioner Jerzy Grotowski in the 1960s which aimed to strip theatre of all elements he deemed non-essential (for example a stage, lighting, sound, costume) and focus on the skill of the actors. Settings, furniture, etc. are represented through the imaginative use of a very small number of props, including the performers' own bodies. |
| Posture | Physical alignment of a performer's body, or a physical stance taken by a performer, which conveys information about the character being played. |
| Process/product | <i>Process</i> refers to the journey that a piece of drama follows from initial ideas, through discussion, planning, exploration, revision and rehearsal to reach the point at which it can be presented to an audience. <i>Product</i> is the final 'polished' performance, including any design elements, which is ready to present to an audience. |
| Prologue | An explanatory speech given by a performer to the audience at the beginning of a play. Common in classical, Elizabethan and Restoration theatre. An epilogue was spoken at the end of the play and often asked for the audience's goodwill and applause. |
| Promenade | An immersive style of production where the actors and audience share the same space. Often involves the audience moving from place to place within the performing area to follow the story. |

| General terms | What it means |
|--------------------|--|
| Prompt | To give actors their lines as a reminder. The <i>prompter</i> is the person who assists actors in remembering their lines. |
| Prompt copy | Production script that notates the actors' moves, technical cues, scenery changes, use of props, etc. Used by the stage manager to run rehearsals and performances. |
| Props | <p>Short for <i>properties</i>, props refers to any article used as part of a dramatic production that is not costume or set; it is any moveable object that appears on stage during a performance. If a piece of set is used in a direct way, then it becomes a prop; for example, a chair is part of the set but if a character picks the chair up and uses it for a particular purpose, such as to jam a door shut, then at that moment the chair becomes a prop.</p> <p><i>Hand props</i> are items such as tools, weapons or luggage that are carried on stage by an individual actor.</p> <p><i>Personal props</i> are items usually carried in an actor's costume, such as money or a pen.</p> |
| Proscenium | A frame or arch separating the stage from the auditorium . The proscenium opening was of particular importance to the Realistic playwrights of the nineteenth century, such as Ibsen and Shaw, for whom it was a picture frame or an imaginary fourth wall through which the audience experienced the illusion of spying on the characters. |
| Protagonist | The main character or hero in a play or other literary work. See also antagonist . |
| Proxemics | Contemporary term for ' spatial relationships ', referring to the physical distances between actors on a stage that communicates the relationship between different characters. Proxemics is also applied to the distance between a performer and elements of the set, which conveys information about character and circumstances. |
| Realism | A modified form of naturalism . Language and dialogue, movement and settings would ideally reflect everyday life situations without any sense of artificiality. Henrik Ibsen is an exemplar of the movement. |
| Rehearsal | <p>The process of bringing a script to life on the stage, after the initial period of exploration by director and cast has been completed. During the rehearsal process, actors learn to work 'off book' (without a script) and focus on achieving complete fluency in the performance. Rehearsal of a devised piece does not properly start until at least the main outline and structure of the piece have been agreed by the group, although the piece will continue to be shaped and developed through the rehearsal process.</p> <p>A <i>technical rehearsal</i> ('Tech') is an opportunity to run through all the lighting, sound and set change cues in sequence, often using only fragments of the dialogue.</p> <p>A <i>dress rehearsal</i> is a full performance of the piece as if to an audience.</p> |

| General terms | What it means |
|----------------------|---|
| Repertoire | <p>For the purpose of this syllabus, the term ‘repertoire’ refers to the entire body of professionally published dramatic texts that have been produced and performed for the professional stage.</p> <p><i>Personal repertoire</i> is made up of all the music or dramatic texts, for example, that an individual knows well and can perform.</p> <p>A <i>company’s repertoire</i> is all the music, dramatic texts, dances, operas, for example, that it can perform.</p> <p>Repertoire also refers to all the works that exist within a particular type of activity or art form.</p> |
| Resolution | How the problem or conflict in a drama is solved or concluded. See also exposition , climax and dénouement . |
| Rhythm | <p>In <i>verse speaking</i>, rhythm is the measured flow of words or phrases forming patterns of sound.</p> <p>In <i>performing</i>, rhythm is the tempo, pace or regular pattern of the work.</p> <p>Rhythm can reflect the emotional state of a character or group of characters, or the atmosphere of a scene.</p> |
| Rising action | A series of plot-related relevant incidents that create suspense, interest and tension in a narrative. |
| Ritual | A prescribed form or ceremony. Drama grew out of religious ritual. |
| Role | The character portrayed by an actor in a drama. |
| Role playing | Improvising movement and dialogue to put oneself in another’s place in a particular situation, often to examine the person(s) and/or situation(s) being improvised. |
| Running time | The time that a play takes to perform. |
| Satire | A play in which irony , exaggerated characters and ridicule are used to expose or attack such aspects of society as foolishness, social snobbery or hypocrisy. Often used to criticise political figures or regimes. |
| Scene | A self-contained unit within a play, with its own structure. Scenes can vary greatly in length from a single line or action, to an extended passage over several pages of text. |
| Scenery | The theatrical equipment used in a dramatic production to communicate environment or represent a real place. Examples of scenery include curtains, flats, backdrops or platforms. |
| Scenography | The art of creating performance environments using one or more components including light, costume, set, space and sound. |

| General terms | What it means |
|------------------------------|---|
| Script | The written document setting out scene descriptions, stage directions and lines to be spoken by performers in a formal way. A drama script has to work as a piece of practical theatre and is often seen as a set of instructions to performers, directors and designers as to how to bring the play to the stage. Script is different from <i>screenplay</i> , which relates to work in film and includes description of location and camera movement. |
| Set | The physical surroundings visible to the audience, in which the action of the play takes place. |
| Set designer | The person who designs the physical surroundings in which the action of the play takes place. |
| Setting | When and where the action of a play takes place. |
| Sightlines | Imaginary lines of sight that determine what areas of the stage are visible to the audience from any given seat. |
| Signifier | A visual clue that conveys a particular meaning to an audience. Examples are often stereotypical in nature, for example spectacles (intelligence), a suitcase (imminent journey). |
| Site-specific theatre | Drama created to be performed at a specified non-theatrical location. Examples might include a beach, a warehouse, a shopping mall, etc. |
| Soliloquy | A speech in which an actor speaks the inner thoughts of his/her character aloud for the audience to share; the actor is usually alone on stage during a soliloquy. Not to be confused with a monologue . |
| Sound | The effects an audience hears during a performance to communicate character, context, environment or mood. |
| Space | A defined area. |
| Spass | Literally 'fun'. Brechtian technique: by making the audience laugh they then think about issues raised in the drama. |
| Spatial awareness | Also referred to as spatial relationships , a traditional term for what is currently referred to as proxemics . |
| Spatial relationships | Also referred to as spatial awareness , a traditional term for what is currently referred to as proxemics . |
| Special effects | Visual or sound effects used to enhance a theatrical performance. |
| Spoof | A light, good-humoured parody of a particular genre or style of drama. |
| Stage presence | The level of confidence, commitment and energy an actor appears to have on stage. It is the ability of an actor to hold the attention of the audience. |

| General terms | What it means |
|-------------------------|--|
| Staging | A general term for the choices made by directors and actors about using or adapting performance spaces as in ' <i>staging a play</i> '. It can also refer to the movement and positioning of actors to communicate character relationships and create interesting stage pictures. See also blocking . |
| Status | The power dynamic between two characters. A high status character would behave in a dominant fashion, a low status character would behave submissively. |
| Stock characters | Characters who represent particular personality types or characteristics of human behaviour. Stock characters are immediately recognisable and appear throughout the history of theatre, beginning with Greek and Roman comedy and elaborated upon in <i>commedia dell'Arte</i> . |
| Story line | The plot or plan of action in a play or devised piece. |
| Structure | The arrangement of and relationship between the constituent parts of a whole as in ' prologue, exposition, dénouement ', or scenes and acts within a play or devised piece. |
| Style | The distinctive way in which a play is performed, for example in a naturalistic way with setting and costume in keeping with the actual period of the play. Alternatively, a play may be presented in a style deliberately at variance with its original setting or performance, for example a naturalistic play performed in a minimalist or symbolic way. |
| Stylisation | The shaping of dramatic material, settings or costumes in a deliberately non-realistic manner. |
| Subtext | What a character is really thinking or feeling when they say particular words. Subtext is linked to motivation . |
| Suspense | A feeling of uncertainty as to the outcome, used to build interest and excitement on the part of the audience. |
| Symbolism | The use of symbolic language, imagery, set design or colour to evoke emotions or communicate ideas. |
| Tableau | A technique in creative drama in which actors create a frozen picture, as if the action were paused; plural is <i>tableaux</i> . |
| Tempo | The speed at which the action on stage proceeds. Tempo will vary depending upon the nature of the action and the circumstances in which it takes place. Often combined with rhythm in dramatic contexts such as in 'tempo rhythm'. It has a very similar meaning to pace . |
| Tension | The atmosphere created by unresolved, disquieting or inharmonious situations that human beings feel compelled to address. In the theatre, tension may be caused by a threat to a character or confrontation between characters, creating a sense of anxiety in the audience. Alternatively, tension may be created by the tasks or different objectives characters set themselves, such as: Will they succeed? Who will win? |

| General terms | What it means |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Text | The basis of dramatic activity and performance; a written script produced by a playwright or agreed by a group through the process of devising. |
| Theatre | The physical building where plays are performed, and the associated business of staging plays involving actors, producers, directors, stage management, designers and marketing. |
| Theatre games | Improvisational exercises structured by the director or teacher to achieve a specific objective, such as breaking down inhibitions or establishing trust. |
| Theatre-in-the-round | An acting area or stage that may be viewed from all sides simultaneously. See also end on, thrust, traverse . |
| Theatre of the Absurd | Theatre that grew out of the existentialist philosophy of the twentieth century, which argued that human existence was essentially meaningless. Characters in Absurdist drama are often unsure of their own location and identity, and have no sense of purpose. Settings are minimalist, plots are circular and dialogue is illogical-sounding. Proponents of Absurdist theatre include Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco. |
| Theatre of Cruelty | Dramatic philosophy developed by the twentieth century practitioner Antonin Artaud, who argued that drama should express intense feelings of pain, suffering and destructiveness through non-verbal techniques: movement, sound, symbolism and images. |
| Theatre of the Oppressed | An umbrella term for theatrical forms (including Forum theatre) developed by the Brazilian practitioner Augusto Boal, who aimed to use theatre as a means for bringing about political and social change. |
| Theme | The basic idea of a play; the idea, point of view or perception that binds together a work of art (for example 'triumph of the underdog' or 'the destructive power of jealousy'). |
| Thrust | A stage that extends into the audience area, with seats on three sides of a 'T'-shaped acting space. See also end on, theatre-in-the-round, traverse . |
| Timbre | The distinctive character or quality of a musical or vocal sound, apart from its pitch or intensity , such as in a nasal voice quality. |
| Timing | Has a variety of applications, including setting cues for effects and lighting, synchronising two or more things that must happen simultaneously, and establishing the pace at which lines will be delivered or the play performed. In comedic theatre, timing refers to the precise delivery of a line so that it provokes the audience to laugh. |
| Transition | Movement, passage or change from one act, scene, section, position, state, concept, etc., to another. |

| General terms | What it means |
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| Tragedy | A form of drama based on human suffering that stimulates a mixture of sympathy and horror in the audience at the inevitable downfall, usually death, of the protagonist . <i>Classical tragedy</i> is a form of drama that originated in Ancient Greece and treats in a serious and dignified style the sorrowful or terrible events suffered or caused by a heroic individual. |
| Traverse | Form of staging where the audience is on either side of the acting area. See also end on, theatre-in-the-round, thrust . |
| Turning point | The climax or high point of a story, when events can go either way. |
| Upstage (verb) | To upstage. To deliberately draw the audience's attention away from another actor or actors by overacting, using flashy bits of business , or other means. The term originated from an actor purposefully positioning himself upstage of the other actors so that they must turn their backs on the audience to deliver their lines to him or her. |
| Upstage (preposition) | A position further away from the audience on a proscenium arch or end on stage. Older theatres often had a sloped stage, known as a <i>rake</i> , so that an actor further away from the audience was slightly higher and could still be seen. See downstage . |
| Verbatim theatre | A form of drama in which plays are created from the exact words spoken by people when interviewed about a real-life event. |
| Verfremdungseffekt | The original German term for Brecht's alienation effect . |
| Vocal expression | How an actor uses his or her voice to convey character . |
| Vocal projection | Directing the voice out of the body to be heard clearly at a distance. This will involve practice in articulation , breath control and support. |
| Voice | The combination of vocal qualities an actor uses such as articulation , phrasing and pronunciation. |
| Wings | Offstage areas to the right and left of the acting area on a proscenium or end on stage. |

Specialist technical terms for lighting and sound

| Specialist technical terms for lighting and sound | |
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| Backlight | Light coming from behind scenery or actors to make the actors stand out against the background, or create a silhouette effect. |
| Barn doors | A rotatable attachment fixed to the front of a fresnel spotlight . It consists of two or four metal flaps that are hinged so that it is possible to cut off the beam in a particular direction(s). |
| Battens | Compartmentalised floodlights set up to allow colour mixing. Low voltage battens are commonly used as light curtains and for colour washes. Known in the US as a <i>striplight</i> . These are likely to be used when digital lighting equipment is unavailable. |
| Bifocal spot | Profile lantern with two sets of shutters, one of which produces a hard edge, and one a soft edge. |
| Colour filter | Also known as a 'gel', a colour filter is positioned in front of a lantern to change the colour of the light. It is often used where digitally controlled LED lighting is unavailable or unsuitable. |
| Colour mixing | Stage lighting that combines the effects of two or more colour filters or gels. |
| Cross fade | Bringing another lighting state up to completely replace the current lighting state. Also applies to sound effects/music. Sometimes abbreviated to <i>Xfade</i> or <i>XF</i> . A dipless cross fade is where <i>increasing</i> light levels move upward evenly to their new state while simultaneously, <i>decreasing</i> levels move downward to their new state. |
| Desk | An abbreviation for 'lighting control desk' or 'sound control desk' (also sometimes referred to as 'the board'). |
| Diegetic sound | Sound that would be audible to the characters in the play, such as footsteps or a doorbell. In contrast to non-diegetic sound , such as music used to underscore a scene and create atmosphere. |
| Downlight | A light from directly above the acting area. |
| Drape | Plain black curtain used to hide parts of the stage or backstage area from view. |
| Flood | To wash the stage with general lighting. |
| Floodlight | A simple box shaped lantern containing a lamp and a reflector. It has no lens and is best used for even illumination of scenery or a cyclorama. |
| Follow spot | Manually operated spotlight, usually on an adjustable stand, used to highlight individual performers. |
| Fresnel spotlight | Adjustable spotlight giving a diffused light, created by the construction of its lens of 'concentric circles'. Used with barn doors . |
| Gauze | A drop made of fabric that seems almost opaque when lit from the front but semi-transparent when lit from behind. Also known as a <i>scrim</i> . |

| Specialist technical terms for lighting and sound | |
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| Gobo | Metal stencil placed in front of the lens of a lantern and used to project images or patterns on stage. |
| Grid | Metal structure above the performing area used for hanging lanterns, running power cables, etc. |
| Intelligent lighting | Stage lighting that has automated or mechanical abilities to enable versatile and complex effects. Intelligent lighting is also known as <i>automated lighting</i> , <i>moving lights</i> or <i>moving heads</i> . |
| Lantern | The generic term for a stage light source. Also called <i>instrument</i> or <i>luminaire</i> in the US. |
| LED | LED stage lights use light-emitting diodes (LEDs) as a light source. LED lights are an alternative to traditional stage lanterns that use halogen lamps or high-intensity discharge lamps. LED lanterns can provide easy variation in colour without the need for colour filters . |
| Lighting state | The lighting set-up used at any given point in a production creating a lighting 'picture'. A lighting cue is given by stage management which initiates the change from one lighting state to the next. |
| Parcan | A PAR (Parabolic Aluminised Reflector) lantern is basically a tin can with a lamp inside. The lantern is a sealed beam unit consisting of a lamp, reflector and lens in one. Parcans are available in a range of beam angles. They are used mostly in the live music and exhibition industries but are also used for some theatre lighting applications. |
| Pre-set | Lighting state used to illuminate the performing area before the play begins. |
| Profile lantern | A focusable spotlight having an ellipsoidal lens that enables a sharp-edged beam of light to be projected. Profile lanterns used in groups enable actors to stand out against background or scenery. |
| Rig | (<i>verb</i>) To hang stage lights in an agreed configuration. |
| Sound design | <p>Sound design is the art and practice of creating sound tracks for a variety of needs. It involves specifying, acquiring or creating auditory elements using audio production techniques and tools.</p> <p>The three categories of sound design are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Functional</i> – for example practical sounds such as a gunshot to coincide with an action on stage. • <i>Atmospheric</i> – i.e. the possibility of using underscoring that may include music but which may also be in the form of a soundscape. • <i>Incidental</i> – where sound can be used to cover moments of transition (for example between scenes or to cover the placing of stage props). |

Specialist technical terms for lighting and sound

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| Sound effects | Any sound artificially produced or reproduced from a recording, to create a theatrical effect. There are two types of sound effects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Recorded</i> – often abbreviated to <i>FX</i>. May form an obvious part of the action (for example train arriving at station) or may be in the background throughout a scene (for example birds chirping). • <i>Live</i> – gunshots, door slams and offstage voices (among many others) are most effective when done live. |
| Sound elements | The qualities of sound. They are pitch, timbre, intensity, duration and can apply to music, sound effects, actors' voices, etc. |
| Snap | An instant transition from one lighting state to another. |
| Special | Stage light that is used for one specific effect rather than as part of a lighting state . |
| Stage management | The organisation of the practical elements of a performance, including scene changes, setting of props, lighting and sound cues and calling of actors. The stage manager prepares the performance space and 'runs' the show. During rehearsal the stage manager prepares the rehearsal space and makes notes on positions of items of set. |
| Strike | (<i>verb</i>) To remove props, scenery, etc. from the performing area. Also to dismantle the set when a production has finished. |
| Strobe | Intense light that is repeatedly turned on and off at high speed to create a flickering, slow motion effect. |
| Truck | A wheeled platform on which scenery is built that can be moved quickly on and off stage during scene changes. |
| Truss | A structure used to hold up stage lanterns, often in place of or in addition to a permanent lighting grid . |

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