

GLOSSARY OF COMMON THEATRE TERMS

Act: Apart from being what actors do on stage, the term also denotes a division in the performance of a play. Each act may also have several scenes.

Actor: A performer in a play

Ad lib: Short for the Latin *ad libitum* meaning “freely.” In the theatre to ad lib means to improvise lines though the audience generally shouldn’t know it’s happening unless an actor is responding spontaneously to a comment picked up from the audience. Of course, actors may simply ad lib because they’ve forgotten their lines. Even the most experienced actors occasionally have mental blanks—like the rest of us. That’s when they get a prompt.

Auditorium: Strictly it’s an enclosed space in which an audience gathers to hear a performance, so it’s more commonly applied to concert halls. Generally, in the theatre, the auditorium is referred to as the house—thus the expression, much loved by theatre managers everywhere—“full house.”

Balcony: Strictly speaking, this is the second tier of seating in a theatre, elevated and protruding over the back rows of orchestra or main level seating.

Backdrop: A large drapery of painted canvas that provides the rear or upstage masking of a set.

Backstage: The area behind and around the stage that it is unseen by the audience

Blackout: A theatrical blackout—as opposed to a power failure is a sudden darkening of the stage. A slow darkening is described as “fade to black.”

Blocking: These are the stage movements and positions that the director works out with the actors in rehearsal for dramatic effect—and so they won’t bump into each. The stage manager makes a careful note of blocking directions for later reference.

“Break a leg”: A friendly, customary encouragement offered to performers prior to a show.

Booth: An enclosed, windowed area, usually at the back of the auditorium, used for technical control purposes. Sometimes there is a separate booth for sound and lighting control. The stage manager will operate from the booth communicating with the assistant stage managers through headsets.

Border: A narrow, horizontal masking piece above the stage. Borders serve to hide the lighting rig and scenery—in theatres that can “fly” or raise scenery out of sight. Borders also define the upper limit of the audience’s stage view. See also, teaser.

Call: This is a notification to cast and crew of a rehearsal or performance time. It’s also used to describe the countdown to a performance provided by stage management.

Cast: The complement of actors in a play.

Crew: The team of theatre workers—often the unsung heroes—who take care of the physical aspects of a production at each performance.

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Cue: A prearranged sign that indicates to a performer, crew member or stage technician that it is time to proceed to the next line or action. Actors also listen for cues in the text so that they know when it's time to say or do something.

Cue to Cue: One of the tech rehearsals before opening night when the technicians set their lights and sound. Usually involves a lot of standing around for the actors as they move from scene to scene and from cue to cue without full dialogue as the tech crew and director ensure that they are properly lit and properly heard.

Curtain call: What happens at the end of the play—even if there isn't an actual curtain to signal the end—when the actors acknowledge the audience's applause.

Dark: We say the theatre, or house, is “dark” when it's closed to the public, as between productions or on non-performance days.

Designer: This is a person who designs sets and/or costumes for a play. Also, the person responsible for illuminating a production is often called the lighting designer.

Dialogue: Conversation in a play.

Director: The person responsible for casting the play and interpreting and bringing the text of a play to life on stage. The director also manages the overall artistic unity of the production.

Downstage: The front of the stage closest to the audience.

Dress Rehearsal: A full, normally uninterrupted rehearsal of a play with costumes and make-up. Usually right before opening night and often in front of an invited audience.

Drop: A large piece of fabric hung down onto the stage floor and used to cover the back of the stage or to reduce the size of the stage.

Flat: A flat piece of painted scenery often consisting of a wooden frame covered with either wood and/or a stretched fabric, usually canvas.

Footlights: Once a common feature in theatres, this row of lights across the front edge of the stage is rarely employed today. Even so, you may still hear someone say of an actor: “She really projects across the footlights.”

Front of House: This usually refers to the public areas of the theatre but strictly includes everything in front of the stage. A Front of House Manager oversees staff members who work in this area.

Golds: see Tabs

Green room: A room in the theater—rarely painted green—where the actors and crew can relax or receive instructions.

Grip: A colloquial term for a stagehand.

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House: The place where the audience sits to enjoy the performance on stage.

House lights: The lights in the house or auditorium. Dimming of the house lights customarily signals the start of a performance.

Intermission or Interval: A designated break in a play. In cases where there is no intermission you will be warned in advance.

Italian run: a rehearsal during the dark days between performances to ensure that lines are remembered. Usually run at a warp speed with lines and dialogue said quickly.

Legs: Vertical curtains or flats used to hide the wings from view and frame the audience's view of the stage.

Lines: What actors learn and speak on stage.

Load In: This is what happens when the set and props are moved into the theatre. The reverse is a "load out."

Monologue: A lengthy speech by a single character delivered to other characters in a play; not to be confused with a soliloquy.

Offstage: Technically this refers to all stage areas outside the visible acting area.

Onstage: The acting area of the stage floor.

Orchestra: In its ordinary sense this refers to a group of musicians but the term is also used in the theatre to refer to the seating area immediately behind the orchestra pit—even when there is no pit!

Orchestra Pit: This is where an orchestra will usually be placed in a musical production. It generally extends across the breadth of the stage and is called a pit because it's at a lower elevation so that the musicians do not block the audience's view.

Playwright: The person who writes the play.

Prompt: This is what actors get if they forget their lines. Some theatres have fulltime prompters standing by in the wings.

Props: Objects on the stage such as furniture that are not part of the actual scenery. Hand props are objects the actors actually handle such as swords, books and cups.

Run: In the theatre this refers to the total number of performances or length of time a play is being presented.

Scenery: The various flats, drops, etc. that are used to create a particular visual setting for a play.

Scrim: This is a gauzy translucent curtain. The scrim may be plain or painted. When light is thrown on the front of a scrim it becomes opaque but if objects behind it are more brightly lit they will become

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visible. Balancing lighting levels behind and in front of the scrim is an effective way to create interesting visual effects and transitions.

Set: The scenery for a scene or entire production. In the latter case it is often known as a “unit set” when designed to serve as several different settings with only minor changes between scenes or acts.

Sight lines: These are the imaginary lines drawn from the farthest seats to the stage. This determines where the action is placed onstage for optimum viewing.

Soliloquy: This is a playwright’s device for letting us know what’s on a character’s mind. It’s as if we’re listening in on the character’s thoughts. A soliloquy is different from a monologue in that it’s not being consciously directed at the audience. Shakespeare wrote one of theatre’s most famous soliloquies for Hamlet: “To be, or not to be?”

Smoke: Stage smoke is produced by the vaporization of various oil based substances. Smoke machines or “foggers” direct this nontoxic material on stage to create various effects. Stage Left/Right: These directions are from the actors’ perspective looking out towards the audience. So, if the stage direction calls for an actor to “exit stage left” it will be the opposite of the way the audience sees it.

Stage makeup: This is a makeup used to shape and define actors’ facial feature as seen on stage. It can be simple—just a little lipstick and eye shadow—or elaborate, involving such things as false chins and noses.

Stage Manager: This is a very important person who gives instructions or “calls” for just about everything that happens on stage. Because directors usually leave soon after a show has opened, stage managers are also responsible for seeing that a production continues to be performed just the way the director wanted. Stage managers lurk unseen by the audience, either just out of sight in one the wings or in a booth at the back of the house. Depending on the arrangement of a theatre and scale of a production there may also be one or two assistant stage managers.

Strike: the process of disassembling the set when a production closes.

Tab: This term comes from “tableaux” curtains, drawn back and up to reveal a scene. Nowadays the term describes various curtains hung on stage. In theatres that routinely have curtains that hide the stage when the performance is not in progress, these are called the “house tabs.” At the Sid Williams the front curtains are called “Golds”.

Tech Run: Occurs after the cue-to-cue and before the dress rehearsal. This is when the actors go through the entire play for the benefit of the stage and tech crew so that the crew can ensure that light and sound cues are timed properly to coincide with the actions of the performers. Tech runs include all light, sound, atmospheric effects and music and often also all costumes and make-up.

Upstage: This is the area toward the back of the stage, away from the front edge.

Wings: The areas to either side of the stage that the audience does not normally see.