# THEATRE FORMS

## An Illustrated Guide

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## Introduction

Theatre is storytelling, and theatres are machines that help tell them. They may be comic, dramatic or tragic; they may entertain, educate or advocate; but storytelling is the one thing all of the events in a theatre have in common. The actor/audience relationship determines how stories will be told (presentational or environmental, for instance) and, to an extent, the types of stories that can be told. Therefore, the first consideration for any new theatre building is also one of the core elements of theatre production - the relationship between actor and audience. The spatial arrangement of stage and seating affects every other decision, from the extent of theatre systems such as rigging and stage lighting, to the director's choices in arranging actors and scenery on stage.

Well-designed theatres, regardless of their form, have several important features in common. First, they support a type of intimacy and energy that is only found in live performance. They ensure that the audience is comfortable and can fully experience the story being told without straining to see or hear, and that the performer is aware of the audience's reaction to events as they unfold. Second, they provide an appropriate facility that supports the production. Stage equipment, backstage areas, and ancillary spaces must all be suited to the users' needs. Some key elements of a good theatre are:

- Audience members have clear sightlines, and are close enough to the stage to see the performers' facial expressions.
- Performers feel an intimacy with the audience because the audience is close and fills much of the performer's view by being arranged on sloped or tiered seating, and in balconies and boxes.
- The mechanical system is quiet so that the audience hears silence, not air conditioning equipment, during a play's most dramatic moments.
- The acoustics and sound system are clear and bright, and the performers' speech or singing seems to be coming from the stage, not from a public address system.
- The stage is appropriately sized and equipped for the users and their production style.
- Backstage spaces are efficiently organized, adequately sized, and properly furnished.

With the above guidelines in mind, some of the first questions in designing a new theatre are, "What form should it have?" "What will the relationship of audience and performer be?" "What production style have the users adopted?" The answers will suggest the most appropriate theatre form.

## Proscenium Theatres

The most common theatre form today is the proscenium theatre (Figure 1). In a proscenium theatre the audience is arranged facing a common direction, toward an opening in a wall that separates the audience and the stage. The wall is the proscenium wall and the opening is the proscenium arch, which frames the audience's view of the stage. The proscenium wall hides all off-stage spaces and activities to the sides and above the stage, thus helping to present a clean and controlled stage picture, and one that is more or less the same for the entire audience. A proscenium theatre often has one or more balconies and/or side boxes. These allow a higher seat count, and higher potential ticket sales, while keeping all of the audience members reasonably close to the stage.

The stagehouse (the part of the building that houses the stage) of proscenium theatres holds a counterweight or motorized system of steel pipes. The pipes, or "battens," are hung parallel to the proscenium and placed every 6" or 8" for the depth of the stage. They provide a flexible suspension

system for the scenery, production equipment (lighting, sound, and video), and drapery, including the house curtain.

There are several variations on the proscenium that are well established and have their own name.

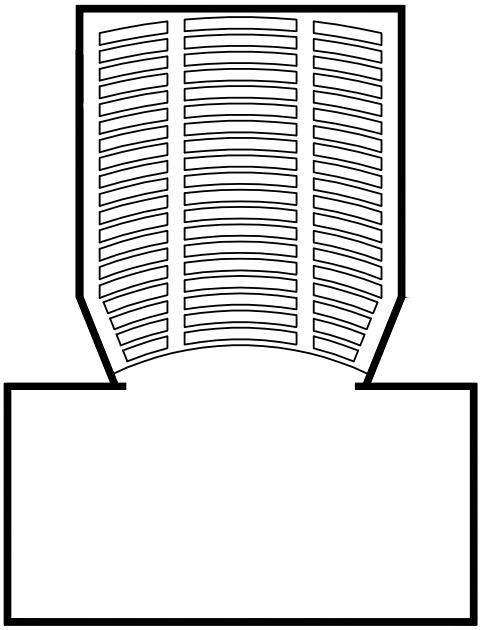

**Figure 1** Proscenium Theatre

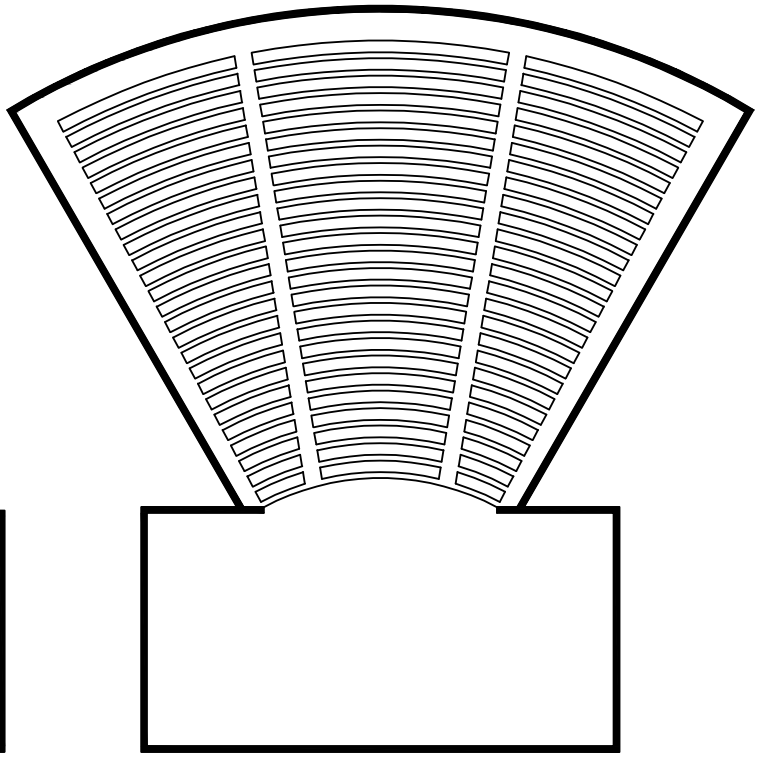

**Figure 2** Fan Theatre

### Fan Theatres

Fan theatres, or fan auditoriums, get their name from the shape of the auditorium (Figure 2). Popular in the 1960s, this form has fallen out of favor because the extensive seating on the orchestra level often replaced seating in balconies. This simplified construction, but the result was that many audience members were too far from the stage to clearly see and hear the performance.

### End Stage Theatres

End Stage Theatres are similar to typical proscenium theatres in that the entire audience is facing the stage from one direction (Figure 3). The differences are A) the audience is typically in straight rows facing straight the stage B) there may be no proscenium wall. In the latter case, the house and stage occupy the same rectangular space and the stage is simply a performance area at one end of that space. An end stage theatre is often the result of converting a relatively narrow existing building into a theatre.

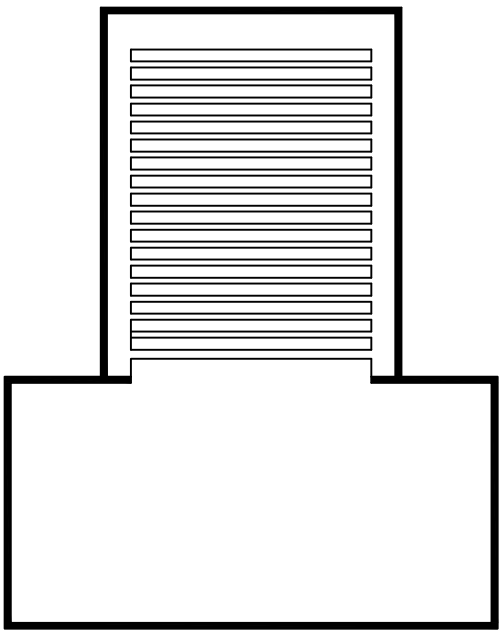

**Figure 3** End Stage Theatre

### Courtyard Theatres

Courtyard theatres are a modern version of English theatres of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries (Figures 4 and 5). The auditorium is usually rectangular, with a sloped or tiered central seating area, a parterre (a raised seating area surrounding the orchestra seating), and one or two balconies over the parterre. In flexible versions of a courtyard theatre the central seating area can be reconfigured to create a thrust, arena, or alley stage.

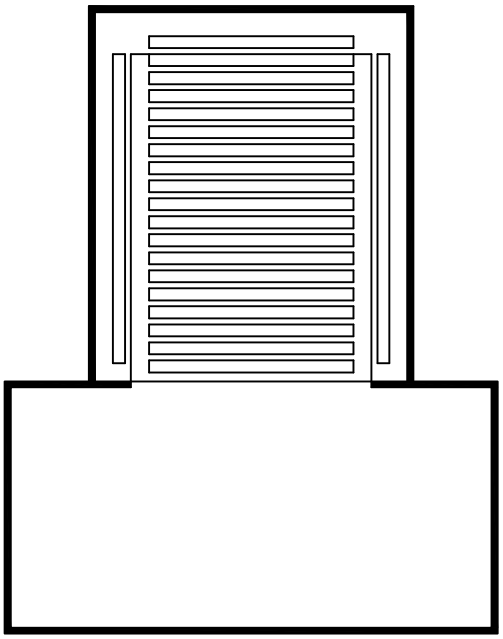

**Figure 4** Courtyard Theatre in Proscenium Setup

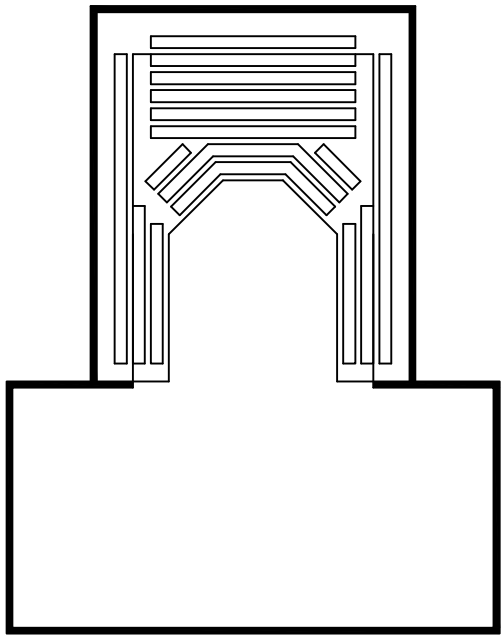

**Figure 5** Courtyard Theatre in Thrust Setup

### Horseshoe Theatres

Sometimes synonymous with proscenium or courtyard theatres, horseshoe theatres are rounded at the rear of the house, giving them a horseshoe shape. They usually have a parterre one to three rows deep surrounding the orchestra seating, as in a courtyard theatre.

## Thrust Theatres

In a thrust theatre the stage pushes out into the audience and the audience wraps around the stage (Figure 6). In doing so the audience is brought closer to the performer, and the performer is in a more natural, less presentational, relationship to the audience. The history of this type of theatre goes back to ancient Greece and Rome. Today, thrust theatres can be found on college campuses and in professional producing, or regional, theatres. Large scenic elements are confined to the end of the stage without audience. The rest of the stage must use low or open objects that do not obstruct the audience's view. With audience wrapping around the stage +/- 270°, actors, directors, lighting designers, and sound designers usually find thrust stages to be more challenging spaces than proscenium theatres.

Over the thrust portion of the stage the movable battens are replaced with one of several alternatives. A small stage may simply have a fixed grid of pipes above it. The grid is usually 3'x3' or 4'x4' and extends well over the audience to provide plenty of lighting positions. A larger theatre may have a system of catwalks over the stage and audience. These offer easier access to the overhead equipment and may have several locations designed to hold followspots. The third possibility is a tension wire grid (Figure 7). This is a series of metal frames supporting a woven net of aircraft cable. The net is tight enough that there is minimal sag when a person walks across it. Lighting and sound equipment are suspended above the grid, which gives access to the entire length and width of the auditorium. The cables are narrow enough that they do not interfere with the beams of light.

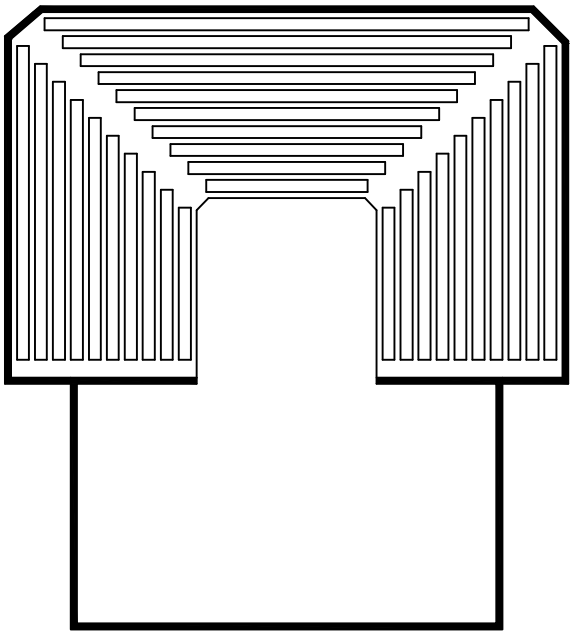

**Figure 6** Thrust Theatre

**Figure 7** Tension Wire Grid

## Arena, or Theatre-In-The-Round, Theatres

Arena, or theatre-in-the-round, describes a stage that is completely surrounded by the audience (Figure 8). Tunnels or ramps, called vomitoria or "voms", give the actors access to the stage, usually at all four corners, from backstage areas. Arena theatres can only use scenery and props that are low enough that they don't block the audience's view of the performers. Actors must be seen and heard from every angle in an arena stage, making this the most difficult theatre for directors, lighting designers and sound designers to work in. Performers must be lit from all angles, and the actors need to change positions frequently so that they no section of the audience is looking at a performer's back for too long.

## Black Box Theatres

Black box theatres provide users with the ultimate in flexibility (Figure 9). As the name suggests, they are open spaces, usually painted black, where neither the stage nor the audience location, or size, is fixed. Instead, the stage/audience relationship is part of the scenery design and is intended to complement the production style. Large black box theatres may include a balcony for audience or equipment on several or all sides. The overstage rigging options are the same as those over the thrust stage.

The flexibility of black box theatres requires a system of adjustable height platforms to create the stage and/or audience seating risers. In many cases not all of the equipment will be used, so adequate storage space is essential.

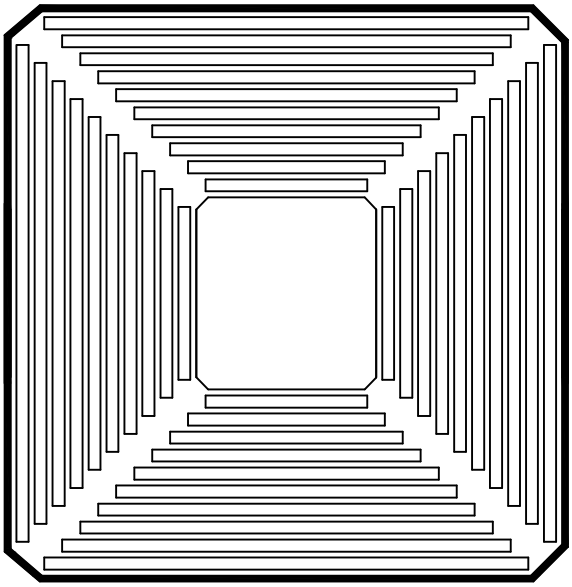

**Figure 8** Arena Theatre

**Figure 9** Black Box Theatre

## Alley, or Traverse, Theatres

Alley theatres place the audience on two long sides of a rectangular stage (Figure 10). They are rarely, if ever, purpose built, but can be set up within a courtyard or black box theatre.

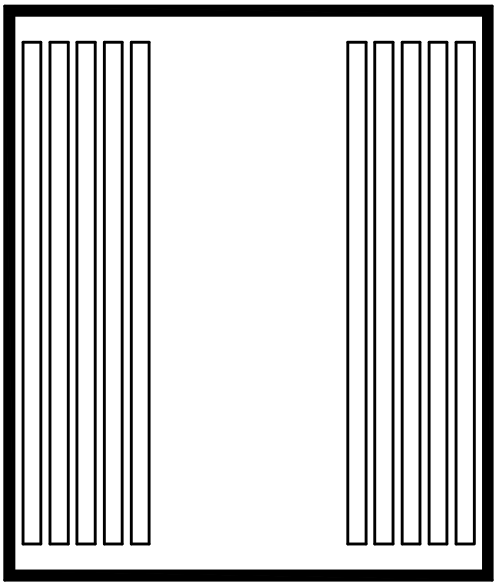

**Figure 10** Alley Theatre

## A Note on Seating and Sightlines

The drawings in this guide show seating arrangements in plan view, with no indication of slopes or tiers. It must be stressed that it is impossible to design a seating plan without closely, and frequently, examining a section through the auditorium and stage. There are two common errors made when designing a seating plan. The first is to plan a sloped orchestra floor of a constant angle. As audience members are seated farther from the stage, the change in the angle of their view to the stage, compared to the rows in front of them, decreases. The result is that a constant slope may provide views over the heads of others for those at the front, but those at the back find themselves trying to see through several rows in front of them. The floor slope must increase with distance from the stage to maintain good sightlines.

The second common error is setting the visual target too high. A theatre isn't a lecture hall. The audience may need to see performers on the stage floor, so a visual target within one foot of the floor and close to the front of the stage is necessary to ensure the audience can see all of the action of the play, musical, or dance.

Finally, building codes and the Americans with Disabilities Act set limits on the steepness of slopes, the length of ramps, the width of aisles, the number of seats in a row, the spacing of rows, and the minimum and maximum height of stair risers. All of these must be taken into account to develop a code compliant seating plan, and their impact on sightlines can only be confirmed in a section.

## Resources


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