UNIT 1 AN INTRODUCTION TO THEATRE AND DRAMA

1.1 INTRODUCTION: DRAMA, THEATRE AND PLAY

This chapter explains the words ‘Drama’, ‘Theatre’ and ‘Play’ and the contexts in which these words are used. These are the basic terms which constantly appear in our discussion and therefore need to be clearly understood. A preliminary question that is repeatedly asked is about the need for the study of theatre arts. Some of the uses of theatre are explained here. We have also a component about some conventions which form the basis for an understanding of theatre activity. Unless these conventions are mutually agreed upon both by the actors and the audience, there is every likelihood of misunderstanding. Some of the major conventions are outlined here.

Objectives:

As an introduction to the study of Theatre Arts, the students will be introduced to the basic concepts of theatre. This chapter will also answer a question that is frequently put to candidates studying theatre as a subject: “why theatre?” The chapter concludes with some rules of the game to be followed by all the members involved in play production.

Theatre, Drama and Play

There are three words which are frequently used to refer to the activity by actors on the stage. These are ‘drama’, ‘theatre’ and ‘play’. All of those mean almost the same, though the contexts in which these words are used may differ.

1.2 DRAMA

The word "drama" may be defined as a composition in prose or verse, presenting in pantomime and dialogue a story involving conflict and usually designed for presentation on the stage. It is derived from a Greek word ‘dran’ meaning “to do”, “to act”. Aristotle, the first great Western critic of Drama, defined it as “imitated human action.” This definition suggests that drama mainly depends upon an imitation of human action which
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consists of conflict. Thus “drama” is usually applicable to a text that is selected for performance. It is more often applied to denote the dramatic literature of a period - “Elizabethan Drama”, “Indian Drama”, “Modern Drama”, “Medieval Drama” etc. It also presupposes a theatre, actors and an audience.

1.3 THEATRE

The word ‘theatre’, from the Greek word “theatron”, means “a seeing place”. It is applied variously to refer to outdoor stages where drama was first performed. In course of time, however, it acquired several shades of meaning, though it still retains its basic meaning of the presentation in dialogue or pantomime of action involving conflict between characters. The word “theatre” is used for three different things connected with dramatic presentation:

1. A building, or part of a building, or any outdoor area for the staging of dramatic presentations.
2. Dramatic works collectively, such as the theatre of Ibsen or the theatre of France suggesting the works of Ibsen or plays written in France that were performed or are likely to be performed.
3. The quality and effectiveness of dramatic presentation, as “good theatre”, “dull theatre”, etc.

1.4 PLAY

The word “play” is a native English word which means “a literary composition in dramatic form intended to be presented on a stage by actors who assume identities, speak dialogue, and perform actions devised by an author.”

All the meanings of the word “play” indicate that it denotes a game, an entertainment, an activity that gives pleasure. However, the word today means any text that is chosen for presentation on the stage.

All the three words thus refer to the composite activity of the stage presentation of a dramatic text. Largely speaking, a drama is a written text; a play is the performance text and theatre - the entire staging including the place for staging and the quality and the audio-visual effect it provides.

1.5 BASIC FEATURES OF DRAMA

Each one of us must have seen several plays, performed on different occasions. Each one of them is different from the other. But we call all of them “dramas” or “plays”. What are the common features in all of them to be labelled as “plays”?

a) In each case, a specific group of people gathered at a specific place to watch and listen as another smaller group of people pretended to be persons they were not, acting out a story written by yet another person.

b) In the above description, you must have recognized the group or groups of people we are referring to. The first group is the audience; the second are the actors and the third one is the dramatist, who is also known as the playwright.

c) We further note that in each play the space occupied by the acting group is more brightly lighted than the area where the spectators sit to watch the play. The lighted area is the stage, covered on either side by wings. There is usually a back curtain and a front curtain also, besides the wings. The stage is equipped with articles of furniture, painted frames of canvas and various other articles.
d) We also notice that the actors wear clothes different from their usual dress, which disguised their own personalities and which seem to belong to the characters they are representing.

1.6 WHY THEATRE?

The Uses and Functions of Theatre:

Though some people argue that the study and practice of theatre is for one's own pleasure, there are obvious uses of theatre in the world which will not only benefit the practitioners but also the public that participate in theatre productions.

1. Theatre as cultural heritage:

Theatre has a proud heritage and to know about its 2500 years long history is to know the cultural heritage of the world. Since theatre deals with human relations as existed in a particular age, and theatre mirrors such relations and so, to know about theatre (history) is to know about our heritage, the customs and manners and behavioural patterns of our ancestors.

2. Theatre as liberal education:

Theatre is one place where you can question anything under the sun and discuss the pros and cons of a question. There is nothing that does not come under the scrutiny of the theatre. The relevance or use of war, man-woman relationship, the atrocities of rulers, the uselessness of power and many others have been moulded into great plays which are still popular.

3. Theatre as Fine Art:

Fine Art is an art that evokes finer sensibilities among human beings. Since theatre's major concern is to discuss human relationships in extremely sensitive movements, no other art form portrays human concerns so delicately, yet so strongly.

4. Theatre as Experience:

Theatre is a place where human faults are condemned and human successes are celebrated openly. Fight against mighty forces at all odds and fight against human foibles and social evils are common in theatre. Theatre is a place where, after witnessing a play, one feels greatly relieved or greatly elevated. You are proud of the human race for a protagonist's undaunted struggle against evil forces and laugh at people's idiosyncrasies so that they will mend their ways. As theatre deals with human emotions, it is directly concerned with human beings' 'inner' lives.

5. Intimacy of the theatre experience:

'Live' and 'intimate' and 'direct' experience is theatre's one advantage over other media that also deal with stories of human experience. In theatre, the process of communication and appreciation (or condemnation) is in two directions at once - from actor to audience and from audience to actors. "Feedback" is never so creative and instantaneous as it can be seen in theatre.

6. Theatre as Entertainment:

Theatre is perhaps the best place which offers "enlightened entertainment". This, in fact, should be the first reason why it lived so long. Theatre presents a slice of life in a way that you re-live your own experiences and relate the theatrical experiences to you own. This is the reason why even tragic stories ennoble your thoughts.
7. **Theatre is Natural:**

The roots of all theatre activities lie in imitation, which is common in various degrees of competence in all human beings. A child imitates his or her parents or teachers, thus learning “the ways of the world”. This tendency continues all through our lives. Theatre is only an extension of human being’s love for imitation since it imitates life and presents a sharpened view of the life it mirrors.

8. **Seeing Drama is a social occasion:**

In a world that is slowly getting distanced because of each one’s “busy” lives, drama offers a safe ground for social get-togetherness.

9. **Drama holds a mirror up to nature:**

Drama, by mirroring life, by imitating the actions of the human beings, makes aware of the nobility of human beings as well as their depravity thereby projecting all phases and types of experience.

10. **Drama is a progressive experience:**

Drama is concerned with the ‘eternal present’. It fulfils the exciting expectations in seeing a story enacted by two methods: firstly, it brings all incidents - past, present and future - into the present, as though these incidents are happening now for the first time before us. Secondly, it builds up the tensions and unties them progressively - so that our sense of expectation is constantly kept active. That is why the words like *conflict, crisis, suspense, surprise, rise and fall of tension*, etc. become very important in studying drama. This happens in any kind of a story narration. But in drama this sense of expectation is the highest because it protrays these tensions before us as no other literary medium does.

### 1.7 **THEATRE AND ITS CONVENTIONS**

It is common experience that every game is governed by certain rules and regulations. These must be acceptable to both the parties participating in the game. Similarly, there are certain rules that theatre also practices. These are called ‘Conventions’. A practitioner in theatre must be aware of the ‘conventions’ in theatre to enjoy theatrical practice.

Conventions are rules that both the actors and the audience must accept and they must adhere to them while the play is on. These conventions describe the special nature of drama and the special circumstances under which it operates:

1. Drama presents situations which are not real by themselves, but reflect an illusion of reality.
2. Drama condenses both real time and place. In real life, incidents take their own time. Similarly, a series of incidents may take place at different places. But for unity and believability, these incidents are shown as though they are happening in a sequence and also the incidents that might have happened at different places are brought together as though they are all happening at the same place.
3. Actors speak more loudly than they speak in real life because the audience will have hear every word they speak. Even ‘stage whispers’ are heard clearly.
4. Movements and gestures are more elaborately emphasized in theatre so that the audience are aware of their significance, for, in theatre, every gesture and movement will denote a meaning. Further, in theatre, all movements are natural extensions of words.
5. Similarly we are made to believe that even if two plants are placed on the stage, it stands for a garden. We believe it to be a room if three flats are placed as three walls. There are also some conventions which are limited to some ages in the past such as using soliloquies and asides; singing songs and poems. Men taking up the role of women was another convention. Every age creates certain convenient conventions of its own to make the plays more enjoyable to the public.

1.8 QUESTIONS

I. Answer the following in about 5 lines each:

1. What do you understand by the word ‘theatre’?
2. What are the uses of theatre activity?
3. What are the theatre’s major conventions?

II. Fill in the blanks:

a) ________ defined drama as imitated _________ action.

b) All the meanings that we have for the word ‘play’ indicate that it denotes a _________, an activity that gives ________.

c) Theatre is a place where _________ faults are condemned and human successes are ________.

1.9 ANSWERS

I. 1. Theatre has 3 different meanings:

a) A building where theatre activities take place
b) Dramatic works, when we speak of them collectively
c) The quality of dramatic presentation.

2. Theatre has several uses:

a) Theatre opens up our rich heritage for us
b) Theatre offers liberal education and is a Fine Art
c) Theatre offers such experience that you can not get such an experience in the outside world within the same period of time.

  d) Theatre experience is very intense.

3. A convention is a long-standing practice, the rules of which are agreed upon by all the people involved.

Some of the conventions of theatre are:

1) to condense the stage area and designate it as something that it is not.
2) Use of a symbolic part of a set in Stage design.
3) Time lapses are accepted
4) Accept an actor not suitable to a role (for example, a lean man as a king) as the character.
5) Songs and poems are elaborately sung though in real life we do not do so.

II. human, pleasure, celebrated, Aristotle, game, human