

Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe

# Approaches to Acting

*Past and Present*



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Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe

CONTINUUM  
London and New York

Continuum  
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX  
370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017-6550

First published 2001  
© Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2001

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**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-8264-4900-X (hardback)  
0-8264-4901-8 (paperback)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Meyer-Dinkgräfe, Daniel, 1958–

Approaches to acting: past and present/Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8264-4900-X—ISBN 0-8264-4901-8 (pbk.)

1. Acting. 2. Acting—History. I. Title.

PN2061.M397 2001  
792'028—dc21

00-043136

Typeset by BookEns Limited, Royston, Herts.  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Biddles Limited, Guildford and King's Lynn

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# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the A-level Drama students at Phoenix College, Morden, Surrey, and the undergraduate students at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, for their comments during the writing of this book.



*To my mother*

# Introduction

Whenever we go to see a 'show' at a traditional theatre or any other performance venue, what we see in the first place are actors or performers on some shape of stage. Numerous other people are involved in the production: the playwright, perhaps a dramaturg, a director, designers, administrators, front-of-house staff and many more. However, the audience does not see them directly. What we see, and hear, are the actors. And yet, were we to believe some recent twentieth-century books written about the theatre, we might think that acting and actors occupy a relatively marginal position in the theatre, compared with dramatists and especially directors. In several publications, the captions underneath production photos carry credits for the photographer, the dramatist and the play, often the director and designer(s), but hardly ever the names of the actors we see on it. Newspaper reviews may devote much space to describing the play's plot, the director's concept and aspects of stage design, only to mention that the actors on the whole did a good job, too. If actors are mentioned by name, comments about them tend, on the whole, to be vague and general: 'X was very well able to immerse herself into the role.'

Many members of the public, whether they go to the theatre or not, appear to have some knowledge of what it means to be an actor, because they may have had some amateur experience at school. As a result, they assume competence to judge an actor's work at a level that, say, a physicist would never expect from anyone not educated in this field.

In this book I want to demonstrate the obvious importance of the actor for the theatre by describing and analysing approaches to acting, both in the West (Europe and the USA) and in India, Japan, China and Islamic countries as examples of non-Western theatre and performance traditions. Following some observations on the worldwide origins of acting, I initially focus on the Western tradition, providing succinct surveys of approaches to acting in Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the period from 1550 to 1900. The twentieth century takes up most space, with a close look at Stanislavsky and his legacy in the development of realistic acting. The wide range of developments in anti-realism and their implication for approaches to

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acting is demonstrated in sections on German Expressionism, Bauhaus, Futurism, Dada and Surrealism, Brecht, Artaud and Grotowski.

As I suggested above, at least in the twentieth century, the director has tended to dominate the theatre. Therefore, a chapter is dedicated to the role of the director in relation to the actor. Over the last thirty years of the twentieth century, traditional theatre has been compared more and more often to innovative forms of what is no longer theatre, but performance, and as such the subject not of theatre studies, but performance studies. This development has been linked with the rise of postmodernism as a general trend in our time. I examine those issues in an attempt to differentiate between acting for the theatre and performance.

Any survey of approaches to acting over the centuries in the West should be complemented by an introduction to the approaches adopted in the non-West. I take India, Japan, China and the Islamic countries as examples. I go into most depth in my discussion of India, relating the position of the actor in Indian theatre aesthetics to Indian philosophy. Although a similar depth would be possible for Japan, China and the Islamic countries, too, I decided against it, as delving into four different philosophies and corresponding mind-sets would be too complicated for such an introductory survey.

Once the basic information on approaches to acting in non-Western cultures is available, it is possible to address a development in the late twentieth century in the West: intercultural theatre. Typically, a Western theatre director takes elements of plot, philosophy or acting techniques from a non-Western culture and uses them in some way in his or her own production, often with a Western, sometimes with a multicultural, cast of actors. Such a directorial approach has implications for acting, which I discuss in a separate chapter.

Actors do not 'just do their work'. They undergo a thorough training in preparation for it. Approaches to actor training have varied considerably over the centuries, and among different cultures. In Chapter 8 I provide a survey of those approaches, comparing Western and non-Western, and past with present. Theatre everywhere, West and non-West, is subject to criticism, most often in the form of newspaper reviews that appear a day or more after a production's press night. In addressing theatre criticism, I rely on my own experience of it in the past, and expectations from it in the future.

The future of acting is at the centre of the final chapter. Taking up some of the issues raised in the course of the book, I outline my own, personal ideas about the potential of acting, and with it the theatre, for the twenty-first century and beyond.

References to quotations from books and journal articles have been collected in the endnotes. In the text, numbers in superscript refer to those endnotes. All references in the endnotes are listed in an

alphabetical bibliography. I had originally considered to provide an annex with names and addresses of drama schools which offer actor training programmes. In the end, I have decided against this: the number of such schools is very high indeed, and some seem relatively short-lived. Selection would have been necessary to remain within the limits of this book, and selection criteria are always problematic. In addition, I have found that a number of simple searches on the Internet reveals that the vast majority of relevant schools are represented through their own highly informative websites. Alternatively, the web leads you to print publications which may list those institutions who have decided not to go on-line yet.



# Worldwide Origins of Acting



Any discussion of approaches to acting has to begin with the issue of how theatre is thought to have developed in the first place. The conditions under which it arose and its context in ancient society have a direct impact on, for example, the way actors were regarded by their peers: were they highly esteemed, for instance, as custodians of a tradition closely related to religious ritual? Or were they regarded as people who imitated real life, thus providing second-hand accounts of reality more or less undesirable in comparison with the real thing? Western theatre scholars approach the issue of the origins of theatre from a scientifically influenced perspective, through the discipline of history. In contrast, many non-Western theatre forms, especially in India and Japan, have their own myths that explain the creation of theatre. It is interesting to look at both in sequence.

Data on which historians of the theatre could base their ideas about how (and why!) theatre developed are very few indeed. Many theories have been put forward, based on intelligent guesswork rather than facts, and none of the theories can be verified. Several prominent candidates for the source of theatre have emerged, possibly interrelated, and all concerned with fundamental characteristics of human nature: myth and ritual, storytelling, imitation and a gift for fantasy. Whichever source one favours, from each of them the actor emerges along similar lines of progression: an activity which was originally an integral part of the source, and which can be described as theatrical, is further elaborated and developed, and ultimately becomes independent of the source both regarding the format of the source and its function for the individual and society.

Take storytelling, for example. It has been regarded as fundamental to human nature, and can be observed in children as early as two or three years old. An account of an event, real or imagined, is initially presented by a narrator, who may use change of voice and pantomime to demonstrate the differences of various characters in the story. Theatre develops when a story's individual characters are impersonated by different actors.

Ritual can have various functions in a society. It is an expression of how the members of the society understand their world. It may serve to teach children and adolescents about that understanding and its implications for their lives. In many societies, rituals are carried out to influence, possibly to control, events, such as the appropriate amount of rainfall. Ritual is often used to glorify (supernatural powers, gods, a hero, etc.), and, finally, ritual may entertain and give pleasure. Brockett argues that most of those functions are shared with those of theatre. In addition, ritual may employ some of the same basic ingredients characteristic of theatre, such as music, dance, speech, masks, costumes, audience, stage and performers.<sup>1</sup> Some rituals involve all, or most, members of a community, whereas in others the majority of people observe (and through observation participate in) the ritual activity carried out by a few individuals. These performers have to be highly skilled and trained, especially if minute details are to be followed precisely. Such skilled individuals may be regarded as precursors to actors in theatre events.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of time, societies abandon their original rituals, but the stories and myths that have accumulated around them remain, and they are taken up in dramatic, theatrical form for their own aesthetic sake, no longer serving the original religious function. Theatre may thus have developed from ritual, and some contemporary theatre artists attempt to lead secular theatre practice, now devoid of religious or, in more general terms, spiritual purpose, and dominated by commercialism, back to its ritual origins. In this endeavour, they are often inspired by non-Western theatre traditions whose philosophical texts on theatre provide a deeply spiritual purpose. The *Natyashastra*, the oldest Indian treatise on drama and theatre, is one example. It was written down between the second century BC and the eighth century AD, but is most likely much older, transmitted in an oral tradition. Towards the beginning of the text we find a passage describing how theatre was created: the golden age, in which all human beings enjoyed a state of enlightenment, complete health and fulfilment, had come to an end. The silver age had begun, and humans were afflicted by the first symptoms of suffering. The gods, with Indra as their leader, were concerned and approached Brahma, the creator, asking him to devise a means that would allow humans to regain their enlightenment, to restore the golden age. Indra specified that this should take the form of a fifth Vedic text, an addition to the four main texts of Indian (Vedic) philosophy (*Rig-Veda*, *Sama-Veda*, *Yajur-Veda* and *Atharva-Veda*). The fifth Veda must be both pleasing/entertaining and instructive, and should be accessible to the *shudras*, the lowest caste, because they were not allowed to read or listen to recitations of the other Vedas. Brahma considered Indra's request, immersed himself in meditation and came up with *natya* (drama), which he asked Indra and the gods to implement. Indra

assured Brahma that the gods would be no good at this task, and so Brahma passed on his knowledge about *natya* to the human sage Bharata, who in turn taught it to his hundred sons, who were thus the first actors. The knowledge imparted to Bharata by Brahma is contained in the text of the *Natyashastra* (*shastra* is a holy text).

Theatre in this context thus has the direct and explicit function of restoring the golden age for humankind, implying restoration of the state of perfection, liberation (*moksha*) and enlightenment for all people on earth. The text then sets out in stunning detail highly specific means of acting (movement and gesture, voice, costume and make-up, and emotional characterization), all aimed at achieving specific aesthetic effects in the audience, and which function as means of raising the level of consciousness of all involved in the theatre, in both its production and reception. There is a tendency in Western theatre scholarship to water down (or preferably annihilate) the implications of this claim for the function of theatre by arguing that its inclusion in the text of the *Natyashastra* is merely a trick used by the author to justify the book to his readers. Another argument might be that the claim must not be taken at face value, because theatre in line with the *Natyashastra*, at least so far, has not achieved restoration of the golden age (we are currently in the darkest of the four ages according to Indian philosophy). Theatre artists, however, appear to take the claim at least a bit more seriously when they acknowledge inspiration from the *Natyashastra* and contemporary forms of Indian dance/drama (which are said to have their roots in the aesthetics of the *Natyashastra*) in their attempts to lead theatre back to its ritual origins.

In Japanese theatre, the first recorded professional actor is Umihiko. He was a divine fisherman, and older brother to Yamahiko, divine hunter. One day, the brothers decided to exchange their tools so that they could experience each other's work. Neither of them was very happy with this exchange, and Umihiko returned arrow and bow to his brother. Yamahiko, however, had meanwhile lost his brother's angling hook. Umihiko was very angry and would not accept any replacement, insisting that Yamahiko return it. In despair, Yamahiko went to the ocean shore and wailed, whereupon he was invited to the palace of the sea-god, who ordered the fish of his kingdom to find the hook. Yamahiko returned the hook to his brother, married the sea-king's daughter and lived in his palace for three years. When he wanted to return home, to his own palace, he received two jewels from the sea-king, which could influence the tide. Umihiko was still angry at his brother, and would taunt and abuse him. Yamahiko, in turn, used the jewels to influence the tide in such a way that Umihiko's fishing would be disrupted. Umihiko gave in, and said: 'From now on I will be your subject, performing plays.' And he smeared his face and hands with red earth and presented the mime of someone drowning. Records describe how he

stops short in surprise at the rising water, lifts his legs when the water reaches knee level, runs around in a circle when it reaches his hips, expresses his inner anguish when the water reaches his shoulders, and cries for help with raised arms when the water is up to his chin.<sup>3</sup>

Another mythical story about the origins of theatre from the Japanese context revolves around the Sun-goddess, Amaterasu. She had been offended by her brother, and retreated into a cave. As a result, the world was left in darkness. The gods perform a ceremony, at the climax of which the goddess Ama no Uzume goes into a trance and performs a religious striptease. The assembled gods all start laughing at once, rousing Amaterasu's curiosity. She opens the door to the cave and asks the reason for the gods' laughter. Ama no Uzume answers: 'We are happy and jolly because there is a god who is even more wonderful than your Highness.' She is shown an iron mirror, and on seeing her own image for the first time, her curiosity grows even more, and she comes out of the cave. One of the gods now grabs her and drags her out of the cave altogether. Thus, the sun has been restored to the world.<sup>4</sup> Interpretations of this mythical story vary. The gods' laughter could be a ceremonial response to Ama no Uzume's dance. It could be the natural response to a comical, 'obscene' disrobing, or it could be the joy at the restoration of the sun expressed in advance of the event. The exposure of the genitals has also been interpreted as the mythical moment of the birth of a theatrical event: the moment when the actual function of the organs of reproduction is set aside, and their 'theatrical' use for sole entertainment is discovered and celebrated.<sup>5</sup>

Theatre history is the business of locating data and interpreting them to arrive at a story, a narrative. Myth provides the story in the first place. As indicated, few data exist that could help us say anything conclusive about the origins of the theatre. From among the ideas that have been offered by theatre historians, and from the story of how theatre was created in the *Natyashastra* and in the two unrelated Japanese myths, we can derive the following preliminary information about the actors:

- immensely skilled, suggesting a demanding training;
- likely to be highly esteemed by peers, both for providing a rewarding experience and for their skills.





# The Foundations of Western Approaches to Acting: Greece and Rome



As with views on the origins of theatre, anything we can say about the actor in ancient Greece is based on few, and evidently contradictory, data. Drama is closely associated with the festivals in honour of Dionysus, the god of fertility and wine, son of Zeus and Semele (daughter of Theban king Kadmos). Semele died while giving birth, and Dionysus was raised by satyrs (half-human, half-beast creatures). Legend has it that he was killed, dismembered and resurrected, symbolic of the cycle of the seasons in nature. His worshippers sought to reach a state of union with his inspiring creativity, and to maintain the fertility of their land. Worship of Dionysus is said to have started in the Near East, and when it reached Greece it initially met with suspicion, because it was associated with intoxication and sexual orgies. In the course of several centuries, however, those excesses disappeared. By the sixth century BC, in Athens, four annual festivals were held in honour of Dionysus. At one of those, the City Dionysia (held towards the end of March), the assumed precursor of drama proper, the dithyramb was first presented. The dithyramb was a hymn sung and danced in honour of the god. It is thought that a chorus of some fifty men sang a refrain to a story based on mythology, improvised by a chorus leader.<sup>1</sup> The dramatist Thespis modified the dithyramb by emerging from the chorus and playing one of the characters of the story, thus developing into the first actor in Western theatre history. It is important to note that the chorus leader maintained his limited function, and is not related to the first actor. The Greek term for actor was *hypocrites*, 'answerer'. The new form of drama, involving chorus, chorus leader and initially one actor, became known as *tragedy*, with dithyrambs continuing to exist independently. By 533, contests for the best plays were part of the City Dionysia; apart from Thespis, we know the names of three further dramatists of the

sixth century BC – Pratinas, Choerilus and Phrynichus – but none of their plays has survived.

More is known about dramatists, plays and performance conventions in the context of the City Dionysia contests of the fifth century BC. Performances were held over a five-day period. On each one of three days devoted to plays, a different dramatist would present three tragedies and a satyr play (a burlesque treatment of mythology<sup>2</sup>). After 487, five dramatists also had to present one comedy each, independent of the tragedy contests. Up to 449, prizes were awarded for plays; after that year also for individual actors.

The members of the chorus were performers in their own right. With Aeschylus, the chorus consisted of twelve men; Sophocles increased their number to fifteen. The men were not professionals, but were not inexperienced either: choral dancing and singing were popular, with around a thousand participants in dithyrambic contests at the City Dionysia alone. Historical sources show that the members of the chorus were allocated to a competing dramatist eleven months before the competition, during which time they would complete their training. Initially, the dramatist himself trained and choreographed the chorus, but in due course, professional trainers took over, probably working closely with the dramatist. Training is said to have been intense, long and arduous, involving special diet, exercise and disciplined practice. In return, members of the chorus were often pampered and given special treatment, remarkable in view of the rather spartan treatment of soldiers.

Initially the dramatists were actors as well, performing in their own plays. Aeschylus introduced the second actor, and with the introduction of the third actor by Sophocles, the dramatist no longer acted himself. All speaking parts of a play were shared among the actors available, and on many occasions one actor had to play several parts. Mute parts were taken by any number of supernumeraries. Initially, the dramatist selected his own cast; later (after 449), the leading actor was allocated to the dramatist by lot, and the two remaining actors were selected by joint decision of the dramatist and leading actor. A contest for tragic actors was introduced in 449, and only leading actors could compete. All actors were paid by the state. The close relation of dramatist and actor implies that the actor took direction directly from the dramatist. The written text did not have stage directions, and it is likely that actors were illiterate and learned their lines through listening to the dramatist reciting them. Both dramatist and actors were held in high esteem in the country.

More details about the acting process can be gathered from three main sources: scholia (that is, commentaries on editions of the plays which may contain references to productions); vase paintings showing actors in performance; and evidence from the related field of oratory.<sup>3</sup>

As before, data obtained from these sources are at times contradictory and have to be scrutinized carefully: the dates of useful comments in the scholia are often uncertain, and with them the validity of the evidence. Vase paintings are not realistic camera shots, but artistic impressions, which may be accurate, but may also express the artistic freedom of the artist. Much of the evidence adduced from oratory comes from the writings of Roman orators, who based their work on Greek origins dating from several centuries earlier.

In general, it appears that the style of acting in ancient Greece was rather unrealistic: one actor would play more than one part, only men would appear on stage, also playing women, and there was a rich mixture of song, recitative, choral passages, dance and the use of masks. The size of the theatre had an important impact on acting: the buildings seated more than 10,000 spectators, with the front row positioned about 60 feet (18 m) away from the stage, and the back rows some 300 feet (91 m). This compares, for example, with a distance of 48 feet (14 m) between the stage and the middle of the dress circle at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London.<sup>4</sup> Gestures had to be broad to be intelligible, and indeed we find that simple gestures were employed to express fundamental emotions: to express grief, the actor may have covered his head with his cloak, or simply looked down. Mourning may be expressed by 'tearing the hair, cheeks, and garments'.<sup>5</sup> In supplication the 'petitioner kneels at his interlocutor's feet, throws one arm around his knees and with the other hand grasps his chin or beard'.<sup>6</sup> Prayer to a deity in heaven was expressed by stretching the arms forward, palms turned up; whereas a deity in the underworld was roused by striking the ground with the foot. Dance often expressed joy, and characters joined hands to swear an oath. Suitably wild gestures, appearing uncontrolled, accompanied pain, sickness and madness. All such gestures are clearly visible even at a great distance, and immediately convey the respective emotion to the audience. In the case of hiding one's face to show grief, the gesture carries a deep psychological meaning: life and light are associated in Greek belief, and the gesture of excluding light is thus 'a powerful visual expression of the death-wish'.<sup>7</sup>

Given the size of the theatre, any minute details of facial expression would have been futile. This may be one of the reasons for the use of masks in Greek theatre. They were made from linen, cork or light wood, which means that today we have to rely on marble or terracotta copies made at the time, and vase paintings. Masks covered most of the head, and had hair attached. It is possible to trace 'deep psychological and even metaphysical'<sup>8</sup> implications of the mask in the fields of psychology, culture, ritual, metaphysics and religion: a mask allows the actor to identify fully with the character it represents. Spectators can project any emotion expressed by the actor's words on to the mask: it seems to laugh or weep depending on the circumstances in the play. According to

Rehm, first and foremost, masks in Greek theatre were a theatrical convention: all actors wore them, endowing them with dramatic power. Together with costumes, they provided the spectator with an immediate insight into a character's type, 'gender, age, social status and economic class'.<sup>9</sup> On a practical level, wearing masks meant that one actor could play several parts in the same play, while the large open mouth of the mask allowed the actor's voice to project powerfully. This was important not only within the large theatre space but also in view of the fact that life in ancient Greek society was 'dominated by rhetoric and oral exchange'.<sup>10</sup>

In Rome, theatre was as closely linked to religious festivals (in honour of gods such as Jupiter, Apollo and Ceres) as it had been in Greece. In addition, performances were put on for special public occasions, such as victories at war, the dedication of new buildings or the funerals of important public figures. The number of days per year devoted to theatre rose from between four and eleven in 202 BC to more than a hundred in AD 354. As the political system of Rome changed from the Republic to the Empire, more and more other forms of entertainment competed with theatre, such as races, gladiatorial contests, wild animal fights and sea battles.

At festivals, magistrates received a specific sum of money from the state to arrange theatre performances. They contracted the managers of acting troupes, who were in charge of the staging. The size of a troupe is not known from the sources of the time. However, it is possible to work out that most plays could have been performed with five or six actors, occasionally doubling up parts. Many of the actors in Rome were originally slaves. When considered talented by their masters, they were given for training to established actors, and subsequently hired out to managers. The profit was shared between master and teacher. All actors received a basic fee, often also personal gifts from favourable audiences. Thus, slave-actors could possibly, depending on their success, buy their freedom from their salaries. Free-born actors appear only late in Roman history, because being an actor would have contravened the code of honour of free-born citizens. Actors were expected to speak, dance and sing, and their training placed special emphasis on the angle of the head, the placement of feet, the use of hands and vocal intonation to convey their characters' emotions. Movements, for which there were strict codes, were exaggerated. The great actors, such as Roscius and Aesopus, listened to the renowned orators of their time to improve their vocal delivery and gestures.

Roman actors wore masks modelled on their Greek precursors. They were made from linen, with wigs attached. However, there was a striking difference between Greece and Rome regarding the cultural and religious implications of masks in general. Wiles suggests that the Greek 'who put on a mask created a new form of life'. The Roman,

however, 'who put on a mask resurrected a dead being'.<sup>11</sup> Whereas Greek culture is dominated by the life cult related to Dionysus, Roman culture is dominated by the death cult, which finds most prominent expression in the *imago*, the death mask, as Wiles describes:

When a man of noble family died, a death mask was made using a wax mould. A person who had the same physique as the dead man, and had been trained in life to imitate him, sometimes a professional actor, would participate in the funeral as the living incarnation of the dead man. Others would wear the robes of office and masks of the dead man's ancestors, and would take their places on ivory chairs mounted on rostra, so that the entire family line was, as it were, brought back to life on stage. ... To be a noble in Roman society was to have the right of receiving a death mask.<sup>12</sup>

In this context it was important for theatre to avoid any possibility of mistaking the masks used in it for death masks. As a result, masks were 'imbued with ignobility'.



## Renewing the Sources: Approaches to Acting in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance



After the Roman empire disintegrated, theatre entered a long period of near non-existence during the early Middle Ages (900–1050). Brockett, however, identifies three remnants. First, there were travelling troupes of mimes, which included all kinds of ‘performers’ such as storytellers, jesters, tumblers, jugglers, rope dancers and exhibitors of tamed animals.<sup>1</sup> Second, there were Teutonic minstrels, who sang and told stories of their traditional heroes and thus preserved history. Originally held in high esteem in their community, following conversion to Christianity, they became infamous, little better in social status than travelling mimes. Third, theatre survived at local festivals, which attracted travelling entertainers. Most of these festivals were originally derived from pagan rites.

The Church also had its ceremonies, which some critics have associated with drama. Mass was rather set in its structure, offering little scope for dramatic elements. The Hours, however, were more flexible. Since they involved ceremonies at regular intervals throughout the day, they were not suitable for working people, and were thus restricted to the monasteries. Here, acting out some of the episodes of the Bible was considered beneficial for the monks’ understanding of their religion. The only one early exception to the restriction of any dramatic element in Church liturgy are the plays written by the German nun Hrosvitha of Gandersheim (935–73?); it is not certain, however, whether these plays were actually performed.

In the middle period of the Middle Ages (1050–1300), the Church rose in power and importance, demonstrated by the building of vast cathedrals, and the schools and, later, universities associated with them.

They became open to laypeople, who were subjected to the dramatic elements of liturgy and the similar didactic intention that had characterized their use in the monasteries. The 'actors' were members of the clergy or choirboys. They were probably not expected to provide naturalistic representations: especially in the portrayal of God or Christ, presenting a real human being would have come across as blasphemous. Rather, an iconographical representation must have been expected, focusing on restraint and decorum.<sup>2</sup> Performers of evil characters, however, were given more freedom to engage in appropriate physical activity. In the records of different productions, Herod, for example, has been described as greeting the Magi with a kiss, inviting them to sit on thrones beside his own, angrily throwing the book of prophecies to the ground and brandishing his sword.<sup>3</sup> More emphasis was placed on the depiction of action rather than on conveying emotions directly, most likely because the actors were amateurs, who were not professionally trained in any modern sense of the word.

In the late Middle Ages (1300–1500), vernacular religious drama developed. On the Continent, it was taken up by the religious guilds, in Britain by the trade guilds. Long cycles of plays based on the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ were divided up among various guilds, so that each one only needed a few actors. Those actors remained amateurs, although the demands made on them by the plays could become considerable: they might have to double up parts (evidenced, for example, by one event in which 300 actors played 494 roles), and were expected to learn their lines by heart (there is evidence of a woman memorizing 2,300 lines as St Catherine in 1468).

Acting in the Middle Ages, Elliott argues, was 'regarded as an art requiring both talent and training; its principal aim was to move the emotions of an audience'.<sup>4</sup> The actors were chosen by audition and various other formalized means of selection. One source states that the selection criteria were 'cunning, voice and person', which Tydeman equates with 'acting ability, vocal range and delivery, and physical presence'.<sup>5</sup> They were then given some two weeks to accept the part, after which they had to swear an oath, in some cases in front of a notary, to attend rehearsals and performances diligently as instructed, or face a range of fines for breaking the contract. Considering the length of the performances themselves, which could extend over four full days, there were relatively few rehearsals.

When plays were not performed by guilds, anyone could participate, although apparently the major parts were quickly taken by the most influential and rich people of the area. Actors were given free food and drink during rehearsals and on performance days, and in some cases there are records of the guilds or town councils working with them on the production of plays, paying actors for income lost because of their commitment to the play. Most actors were men, but there were

exceptions: in particular, the Virgin Mary was at times played by a woman, and records indicate that the woman playing St Catherine had such an impressive stage presence that she later married a rich nobleman who had fallen in love with her during the performance.

The late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries have been cited as the period when acting became more professionalized, in the sense that actors increasingly made a living from their work, ceasing to be amateurs who only performed for a small part of the year as an additional activity to their main profession or job. These troupes of actors were usually associated with noble households, carrying letters of recommendation to prevent them from being 'whipped as rogues and vagabonds'.<sup>6</sup>

The end of the Middle Ages overlaps with the tendencies and currents of the Renaissance. Historians date the Renaissance approximately as the period from 1300 to 1550. Its major characteristics include a humanist tendency to regard life on earth as worth living in its own right, and not merely as preparation for eternity. Although such a shift represented a process of secularization, life remained related to God. A further feature of the Renaissance is the rediscovery of ancient Greece and Rome: long-lost manuscripts were found, studied and often translated, and influenced philosophy and creative writing in literature and theatre.

For several reasons, Italy was dominant in the development of the Renaissance. Geographically, it was placed at the centre of Europe. Financially, it enjoyed a period of affluence. The Catholic Church, which had its seat in Italy, was undergoing a crisis, with internal struggles for power and, between 1305 and 1377, two rival popes. The vacuum left by the dissolving authority of the Church was filled by the rulers of the small Italian states. They sought to demonstrate their power through the number and status of the scholars, writers and artists whom they attracted to their courts.

Within this rich cultural atmosphere, three forms of theatre developed in Renaissance Italy: plays paying homage to important people present at the performance; new productions of Roman plays; and performances of newly written plays of Italian origin. Characters in the plays of homage were taken from mythology. In a play written and performed on the occasion of an important wedding in Milan, Jason and the Argonauts, accompanied by music, appear, carrying the golden fleece, which they leave on a large table on the stage as a wedding present after having presented a dance in homage of the couple. Mercury, followed by three quadrilles of dancers, offers a calf as a present to the couple. Diana as huntress appears, accompanied by nymphs. To the sounds of forest instruments, they carry onto the stage a gorgeous stag on a golden stretcher, covered with leaves. Orpheus bemoans the early death of his Eurydice, and other characters of this three-part play are Atalanta and Theseus, Iris and Hebe (goddess of