

THREE TIER GUIDE

TO THEATRE
GENRES

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When asked what Theatre for Children should be, Stanislavski reportedly said »The same as for adults, only better«

This Three Tier Guide to Theatre Genres has been put together with the aim of supporting Teachers and others who facilitate Theatre and Performing Arts opportunities for Teenagers so that they can select the most suitable theatrical experiences, especially for those are new or newer to Theatre than many of the Teenagers we worked with in the TEEN Project. The hope is that, by selecting and adequately preparing students for Theatrical experiences, Teenagers will engage with the experience more comfortably without being overwhelmed by complex themes or more abstract styles. Nevertheless, it must be said that more often than not, we find that Teachers are overly conservative in their estimations of what they think Teenagers will be able to meaningfully experience and enjoy. Make sure you do challenge them – as they would generally prefer a slight challenge to a 'comfortable' and potentially boring option! It's a fine balance to strike but we hope this guide will help you in whatever you ultimately decide to lead your students towards.

Note that, as the guide has been prepared for a European audience, the Theatrical traditions listed here tend to be Eurocentric in their history and culture.

THEATRE GENRE & STYLE

It is important to note that there is lots of variation within genres (sometimes even more than between certain genres) and that genres are not fixed categories and are often deployed by Theatre practitioners in different types of hybrid combinations.

Nonetheless, learning more about a specific genre or style can certainly help prepare Teenagers for what they are about to see in a Theatre venue. The genre of a Theatre production, as defined by BBC Bitesize (a revision tool for school pupils used in the UK), is "the type of story being told" and the style is defined as "how theatrical ideas are presented on stage." Genre and style give the theatre production its framework. A useful free resource to learn more about theatre genres is [Michael Billington's A to Z of Modern Drama](#).

- There are certain styles of performance that are less abstract, less 'in-your-face', and perhaps more comfortable for first-time Theatre attendees to see. We have listed these under '**TIER 1**'. These performances are perhaps more naturalistic in style and may have more accessible themes. It is important to be aware that all types of performance, even accessible 'Tier 1' productions, may not be suitable for certain age groups due to its content.



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- Next, we have listed styles in **'TIER 2'**. These may suit those who have been to the Theatre before but are not yet regular Theatre attendees. These are slightly more challenging, both in their style and in their themes.
- **'TIER 3'** encompasses the production styles that are most likely to be challenging and are therefore less likely to be appropriate for the average first-time Theatre attendee. Of course, there are always exceptions and we certainly don't want to make you feel constrained by these categorisations!

This guide is by no means prescriptive. Some of the best responses from Teenagers come from productions with incredibly challenging theatrical themes. So, whilst this guide sets out a framework, please do not dumb down the work you share with or take your Teenagers to see - they are more capable than you realise. Whatever you choose to bring them to see, pre-performance preparatory activities or discussions and post-performance reflections will be invaluable! You can find sample workshops for both Pre- and Post- Performance on the TEEN website.



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TIER I: THE FIRST THEATRE EXPERIENCE GENERALLY NON-ABSTRACT, NOT TOO OVERWHELMING, RELATABLE THEMES ETC.

Styles	Explanation / Overview	UK-Based Examples of Prod. / Comp.	Your Own Local Examples
African Story-telling	Traditional African Storytelling is very diverse as it encompasses many different aspects and forms from different countries on the continent and often uses a mixture of different devices - mask, dance, ritual, music, drumming and singing. Traditionally it is not scripted and is instead passed down through generations by memory. Traditional audience-actor boundaries are blurred and sometimes performances can be very participatory. Find out more about African Theatre history by reading Britannica's article , as well as Pre-colonial and post-colonial drama and theatre in Africa edited by Lokangaka Losambe and Devi Sarinjeive.	Koteba of Mali	
Comedy	In simple terms, the intention of a comedy is to make people laugh and for them to view something – such as the message of the play – differently. This may be in a non-literal way or through challenging preconceived ideas (comedy is often very political, even if only in subtle ways). Comedy is a vast category - there are many different types of comedy, including: slapstick, farce, satire, and high comedy. Find out more about the Types of Comedy for Drama Class in this article by Justin Cash.	The Importance of Being Earnest	
Commedia dell'arte	Commedia dell'arte, which translates as "comedy of the profession", is a type of comedy improvisation which was developed in Italy in the 16th century and was typically performed in the open air. It involves stock characters and set sketches that companies reproduce. Find out more about Commedia dell'arte in this encyclopaedia entry .	The Servant of Two Masters, The Liar	

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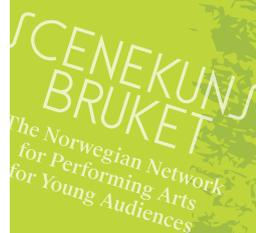


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Creative Adaptation & Story-telling	Creative Adaptation and Storytelling are often based or inspired by myths or novels. The visual design is important for the production and it will often also involve a mixture of music, song, puppetry, and dance. Find out more in Storytelling in participatory arts with young people: the gaps in the story by Catherine Heinemeyer.	The Red Shoes performed by Kneehigh
Ensemble Performance/ Devised Theatre	Ensemble-driven Performance comes in many different forms. Devised Theatre is where the director works with the cast (and other creative professionals) to develop an original production from scratch – often using some specific forms of inspiration to get their creative process started. It is, in many ways, a very open process of Theatre creation. Find out more in Devised and collaborative theatre by Chris Baldwin and Tina Bicât and Ensemble theatre making: a practical guide by Rose Burnett Bonczek and David Storck.	Companies: Graeae, Complicite
Improvisation	Improvisation is where the play is not scripted but is instead made up on the spot. A play can be improvised completely or devised through improvisation before being refined for final performance. Keith Johnstone developed a method called Theatre Sport, where two teams of actors compete against each other in play and improvisation while the audience judge their efforts. Find out more about Improvisation in this article.	Company: The Bristol Improv Theatre
Indonesian Puppetry	There are two main types of Indonesian Puppetry: Wayang Kulit (shadow puppets) and Wayang Golek (rod puppets). Indonesian Puppetry is used to tell religious, moral stories about good and evil. Puppet shows are performed for a range of different occasions, including birthdays. The main puppeteer narrates the story and is called a “dalang”. Find out more Indonesia Puppetry in Voices of the Puppet Masters: The Wayang Golek Theater of Indonesia by Mimi Herbert.	Stories inspired by Mahabharata and the Ramayan
Musicals	Musical Theatre combines songs, spoken dialogue, and dance to tell the story. Often the production will be quite stylised and may also involve techniques such as puppetry or physical theatre. Find out more about Musical Theatre in this guide.	Wicked, Billy Elliot, The Lion King

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Naturalism	In 1867, the French novelist Emile Zola expressed a desire for Theatre and Literature to present a more truthful reflection of human behaviour. Naturalism offers a 'slice of life' - the actors behave in a way that reflects everyday behaviour and dialogue. Find out more about this Western Theatre tradition from Britannica.	A Doll's House, The Cherry Orchard
Pantomime (also known as Panto)	Pantomimes are comedies often performed at Christmas and which involve some form of audience participation such as singing or call-and-response phrases. Pantomimes are based on well-known children's stories but often subtly involve Adult Humour. You should definitely find out more about Pantomime and how it has become such an 'intergenerational' performance event, if you haven't come across it before!	Cinderella, Puss in Boots
Puppetry	Productions that use puppetry involve using inanimate objects and manipulating them to help create a character (whether that is a human or something else, like an animal, alien, or other type of character completely). The person/people manipulating the puppet are called the puppeteer/s. There are many different types of puppetry and types of puppets that you can learn about from Britannica.	Punch and Judy, War Horse
Realism	Realism aims to portray real life on the stage so that the audience can understand and empathise with the characters. Find out more about Realism and its differences to Naturalism in this article on Realism and Naturalism Theatre Conventions .	Look Back in Anger
Street Theatre	Street Theatre occurs in outdoor public places and is typically free. It can be performed by a single person or by a group of any size. It can involve circus skills, music, mime and other elements of theatrical performance. Find out more about Street Theatre in Bim Mason's book Street Theatre and Other Outdoor Performance .	Company: The Natural Theatre Company

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Theatre in Education (also known as 'TIE')	Theatre in Education is often said to have been developed at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry in 1965 but has been used by many people all over the world. Theatre in Education aims to engage Children and Teenagers in their learning through the creative means of a performance or theatre activity. Find out more in Helen Nicholson's book Theatre and Education .	Company: Big Brum
Tragedy	Tragic plays portray the hero of the production trying to achieve their aims but ultimately failing in some way. The hero is defeated and the play ends negatively. Find out more about Tragedy and Types of Tragedy for Drama Class in these articles by Justin Cash.	Oedipus The King, Hamlet

TIER 2: THE 'BEEN-BEFORE' THEATRE EXPERIENCE

- SLIGHTLY MORE COMPLEX PRODUCTIONS
WITH MORE SOPHISTICATED THEMES ETC.



Styles	Explanation / Overview	UK-Based Examples of Prod. / Comp. Your Own Local Examples
Ancient Greek Theatre	Originally created as part of the City Dionysia festival, Ancient Greek Theatre involves a limited number of actors, a chorus, and traditionally takes place outside in a theatre space called a Theatron. Ancient Greek plays focus on tragedy, comedy, or satire and the actors wear masks which reflect these expressions and also help to amplify the actor's voices. Find out more in this article about Ancient Greek Theatre and in David Wiles' book, Greek theatre performance: an introduction .	Medea, Antigone



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Classical	Classical Theatre uses limited props and requires the audience to use their imagination for the play's settings and contexts. Language used in Classical Theatre can range from grand prose to free verse dialogue - Elizabethan and Jacobean plays are good examples. To find out more read The Routledge Research Companion to Shakespeare and Classical Literature and this comparison article about Modern vs. Classical Theatre by Thomas Bell.	Macbeth, Romeo & Juliet
Documentary Theatre	Documentary Theatre uses documentary material (such as newspapers and journals) to develop stories based on real events and people. Find out more in Get real: documentary theatre past and present edited by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson and Acting in documentary theatre by Tom Cantrell.	The Investigation, The Permanent Way
Immersive Theatre	Immersive Theatre is a sensory experience that involves all the senses (touch, taste, sight, smell, sound). Food and drink also can feature in Immersive Theatre with audience members often being asked to roam freely around the space. Find out more in Creating worlds: how to make immersive theatre by Jason Warren and Immersive theatre and audience experience: space, game and story in the work of Punchdrunk by Rose Biggin.	Companies: Punchdrunk Examples of Immersive Theatre from The Guardian
Melodrama	Melodrama emerged during the Victorian era and involves overdramatic, stereotyped and emotionally exaggerated characters. Good typically wins over evil and the play is themed around reality, although heightened to. Find out more about Melodrama in this article entitled Nineteenth century melodrama .	Pygmalion
Naturalism (with more complex themes)	As outlined in the Tier 1 section above, Naturalism presents a 'slice of life' in which the actors act in a way that reflects everyday behaviour and dialogue. However, we have included it in Tier 2 as well to reflect the many Naturalistic performances with more complex themes that may have been too confronting on a first Theatre trip.	A Doll's House, The Cherry Orchard



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Opera	In Opera the story is all (or mostly) sung and accompanied by a live orchestra. Dialogue sung in Opera is called a libretto. In traditional operas there are two singing styles: recitative and self-contained arias. Find out more in The Penguin Concise Guide to Opera by Amanda Holden.	The Fairy Queen, Bonduca
Peking Opera	Music and song are core to Peking Opera. Masks are also a fundamental feature with the colours of the masks being used to help convey the personality of characters: red represents bravery, black boldness, green impulsiveness etc. Find out more about Peking Opera with this article.	Farewell My Concubine, Drunken Beauty
Physical Theatre	Theatre that uses physical movement, gesture, dance and mime to help tell the story. Physical Theatre can be stylised and abstract. The play can explore serious contemporary issues, retell fairy tales, and everything in between! Find out more in Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction by Simon Murray and John Keefe.	DV8, Frantic Assembly, Out of Balanz
Political Theatre	Political Theatre focuses on events that are relevant to current society and focus on some sort of injustice. The hope is that by presenting this injustice to the audience, some sort of change will result. Political Satire, a subset of Political Theatre, is a specific form in which political themes are mocked with the aim of shaming those individuals / agencies to change. Find out more in The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics edited by Peter Eckersall and Helena Grehan.	The Crucible, Top Girls, Blasted
Realism (with more complex themes)	As outlined in the Tier 1 section above, Realism aims to present real life on the stage. Like in the 'Naturalism' row above, we have included it again in Tier 2 for the many productions following the Realist Theatre traditions that may have been too confronting for a Theatre newbie.	Look Back in Anger



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Site-Specific	Site-Specific Theatre encompasses productions performed at a specific location which is not a traditional theatre venue – it could be inside or outside. The site is most often chosen because it has some direct thematic connection to the production. Find out more in Off sites: contemporary performance beyond site-specific by Bertie Ferdman, and Phil Smith's Making site-specific theatre and performance: a handbook .	Companies: Punchdrunk, dream think speak
South African Protest Theatre	South African Protest Theatre was developed to highlight the injustices of apartheid. As such, this type of theatre is a tool for social change. Find out more in At This Stage: Plays from Post-apartheid South Africa by Greg Homann and Theatre and Cultural Struggle Under Apartheid by Robert Mshengu Kavanagh.	The Hungry Earth, You strike the woman, You strike the rock
Verbatim	Verbatim Theatre is a type of Documentary Theatre in which every word spoken on stage is a real quote taken from a real person; these could have been gathered from interviews or transcripts etc. Find out more in Telling the truth: how to make verbatim theatre by Robin Belfield.	London Road, My Name Is Rachel Corri



TIER 3: THE POTENTIAL REGULAR

- A RANGE OF DIFFERENT STYLES,
INCLUDING PRODUCTIONS THAT SOME
MIGHT BE OVERWHELMING TO A NOVICE

Styles	Explanation / Overview	UK-Based Examples of Prod. / Comp.	Your Own Local Examples 
Epic Theatre	Bertolt Brecht developed Epic Theatre which is where different methods are used to make the familiar strange, and make the strange familiar. Brecht wanted the audience to change the world, something he prepared them for by making them re-evaluate what they take for granted in everyday life. This technique is called the Verfremdungseffekt (v-effect). Specific techniques to achieve this include: using shorter episodic scenes, introducing songs between the episodes, direct address to the audience, actors making exaggerated unnatural gestures, cast members playing multiple roles, and more. Find out more in Brecht: a practical handbook by David Zoob.	The Good Person of Szechwan	
Kabuki	Kabuki also originates from Japan and involves exaggerated stylised movement (classical Japanese dance-drama) and actors wearing wigs, ornate costumes and make-up. In 2008, Kabuki Theatre was inscribed in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Find out more about Kabuki here.	Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura, Musume Dōjōji	
Noh Theatre	Traditional Japanese Noh is a highly trained art form which originated in the 14th century. It involves using masks, music, dance and drama to tell a story. The story is based on traditional stories, often involving a supernatural being (the hero) who is transformed into a human form and narrates the story. The essence of the story is conveyed - it is not re-enacted. The masks communicate the roles of the characters while the stylised gestures convey emotion. Find out more about Noh Theatre here.	Aya no Tsuzumi, Aoi no Ue	

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Performance Art	Performance Art can include dance, music, paint, mime, circus or more. The artists' voices, bodies or props are used to convey their artistic expression. They are very abstract and are sometimes known as a 'Happening'. Find out more about Performance Now and Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present both by RoseLee Goldberg.	I am not me, the horse is not mine
Revenge Tragedy	The style is largely for late Elizabethan and early Jacobean eras. Revenge Tragedy is a dramatic style and focuses on the theme of revenge sought by the protagonist and follows their quest for revenge, either for an imagined or actual injury, which ultimately ends in fatal consequences. Elements of this style include disguise a dumb/ mimed show within a show, the supernatural and madness. Find out more in Revenge Tragedy edited by Stevie Simkin.	The Duchess of Malfi, The Revenger's Tragedy
Theatre of Cruelty	Theatre of Cruelty was developed by Antonin Artaud during the 20th century. Actions are considered more powerful than words and all the senses should be confronted. Theatre of Cruelty aims to shock the audience and to connect them to their raw emotions. The focus is on removing the actor-audience divide. Find out more about Antonin Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty and read The theatre and its double by Antonin Artaud	Jet of Blood
Theatre of the Absurd	Developed after World War II, Theatre of the Absurd focuses on existentialism and questions reality and illusion. Two recurring themes that feature a lot in Theatre of the Absurd are the sense of a meaningless world and the isolation of the individual. Find out more in Andrew Dickson's article Nonsense talk: Theatre of the Absurd .	Waiting for Godot, The Birthday Party

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Theatre of the Oppressed

Augusto Boal developed Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil in the 1970s. Theatre of the Oppressed explores social and political issues by placing the audience in the role of "spectators". In this role, they are actively involved in the story and can change the outcome to resolve the problem being displayed in a way that they think is best. The facilitator of the performance is called the 'joker' and their role is to ensure that the solutions enacted and workshopped are as realistic as possible. Find out more in [Theater of the Oppressed](#) by Augusto Boal and [Forum theatre for children: enhancing social, emotional and creative development](#) by Nick Hammond.

Performances are based on issues of the time. Company Cardboard Citizens use Forum theatre



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