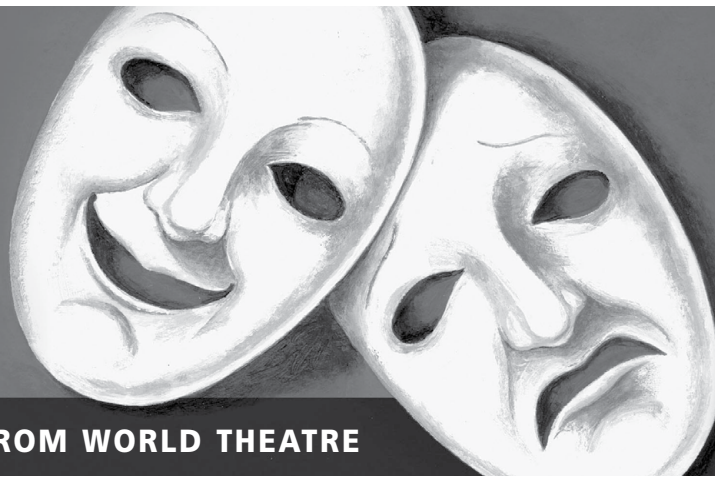


DAVID TIMSON

The History of Theatre

Read by **Derek Jacobi** and cast



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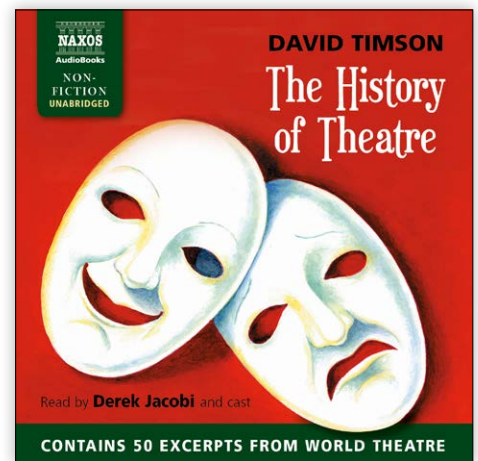
CONTAINS 50 EXCERPTS FROM WORLD THEATRE

Here is the diverse and fascinating story of the Theatre, from the first tragedies and comedies of Ancient Greece to the high-tech mega-musicals of the late 20th century. It is an absorbing tale, encompassing ancient tales, medieval theatre, Commedia dell'Arte, the great dramas of the Elizabethan age, the foppish 18th century, the European developments in France, Germany and Spain with Russia making its main impact in the 19th century. As the 20th century progressed, the theatre moved in different experimental directions, particularly in America and Europe.

Interwoven within the story are the playwrights, the actors, the designers and theorists who have kept this performing art flourishing for 2,500 years.

All this is illustrated by more than 50 excerpts from plays and contemporary accounts, ranging from the controversial and innovative to sheer entertainment.

Here is the rich variety of experience that is the Theatre.



Total running time: 5:10:10

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DAVID TIMSON

It will soon become apparent to anyone listening to **The History of Theatre** that it was written by an actor. David Timson has worked as an actor for nearly thirty years in theatre, television and film, but most consistently for BBC Radio.

He won the BBC Student Prize in 1971 and has since made over 1,000 broadcasts, ranging from the title role in *Nicholas Nickleby* to that past institution *Listen With Mother*. He has frequently read serials and short stories for *Woman's Hour* and Radio 4. He has also recorded substantially for Naxos AudioBooks, reading poetry for their collections of Comic and Oriental verse. He has embarked on a project with Naxos to record the complete stories of Sherlock Holmes, and last year, in conjunction with Naxos and Cambridge University Press, he directed the production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.



Derek Jacobi is one of Britain's leading actors, having made his mark on stage, film and television – and notably on audiobook. He is particularly known for the roles of *I Claudius* and *Brother Caedfael*, both of which he has recorded for audiobook. His extensive theatrical credits,

from London's West End to Broadway (where he was appearing in *Uncle Vanya* immediately after making this recording) in works encompassing the whole range of theatre, make him especially suited for narrating *The History of Theatre*.



Carole Boyd trained at the Birmingham School of Speech and Drama where she won the principal national prize for voice, the Carleton Hobbs Award, and immediately joined the BBC Radio Drama Company. Vocal versatility is her speciality, from her creation of the notorious character of Lynda Snell in *The Archers* to *Poetry Please* and all the female characters in *Postman Pat*. She has won two prestigious awards for her reading of Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Huth's *Landgirls*. She has also written and recorded her own audiobook, *Lynda Snell's History of Ambridge*.



John McAndrew trained at LAMDA. He spent several seasons at the RSC where productions included *Peter Pan*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Edward II* and *School of Night*. Seasons at Manchester Royal Exchange appearing in *The Voyage Inheritance* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. He won the Carleton Hobbs Radio Award and has since appeared in numerous radio plays, including the highly successful adaptation of *Lord of the Rings*.



Teresa Gallagher has performed in many leading roles in both plays and musicals across the country, London's West End, and Off Broadway. In addition, she is a well-known voice to listeners of BBC Radio Drama. Her work on film includes *The Misadventures of Margaret* and Mike Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy*.



Caroline Faber trained at Webber Douglas. On leaving, she made an immediate impact with performances at the Royal National Theatre, Watford Palace and other theatres in the UK. Her television appearances include *Midsomer Murders* and *Comedy Nation*.

DAVID TIMSON

The History of Theatre

*'He that denies then theatres should be,
He may as well deny a world to me.'*

So wrote Thomas Heywood in 1612, shamelessly borrowing an idea from his contemporary William Shakespeare. It is a thought that echoes through this history, that the theatre reflects the world, and the world, the theatre. Is art imitating life or vice versa?

The world would have rolled on if the phenomenon of theatre had never existed, but the quality of human life would have undoubtedly been the poorer. Theatre may not be a physical necessity, but as King Lear says 'allow not nature more than nature needs, man's life's as cheap as beast's'.

At its best the theatre is an arena for ideas, stimulating and controversial ideas at that, for it is in its nature to be anarchic and to continually question accepted views. Thus Ibsen and Chekhov raise in their plays social questions the nineteenth century would rather have ignored, and point the way forward in the twentieth century for playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht, George Bernard Shaw and Arthur Miller. Food for thought is one thing, however, but it is also the theatre's job to entertain and add to the 'gaiety of nations'. Celebration of the human spirit is also important. The feeling of satisfaction as evil is defeated, the joy when a love-match works out, or amusement as a fool is exposed. That is why the long-time symbols for the theatre, recognised the world over, are the masks of Comedy and Tragedy. They balance each other and are inseparable, reminding us that you can't have one without the other. The serious and the ridiculous go ever hand in hand in our story.

Sophocles and Aristophanes, Racine and Molière, Ibsen and Feydeau. These are the playwrights whose work endures from age to age, but the story of the theatre is also the story of actors, "that despicable race", whose inspiration, invention

and dedication to their ephemeral art, provide the life-blood of this story. As acting styles continually changed with each generation, moving inexorably towards a more naturalistic 'real life' presentation, so too theatre buildings evolved to match those styles. From the giant arenas of the Greeks, the open platform of the Elizabethans, the intimate Court-theatres of Molière, the picture-frame stages of the nineteenth century, to the flexible small studio spaces of the twentieth.

Any history is bound to be subjective, and there will be omissions, and aspects of this history treated too briefly for some. Selection too has meant that this 'History' is essentially a history of Western Theatre. Both Western and Eastern theatre evolved from ritualistic dances linked to religion, but whereas Western theatre sought an ever more naturalistic presentation, the theatre of India, China and Japan retained a highly stylised manner of performance. Their repertoire is unchanging and timeless. It is a different tradition and requires a separate study.

I have tried to give at least a taste of all the major developments in this long and diverse history, which spreads over 2,500 years. I hope the taste will whet the appetite for listeners to go on their own journeys of discovery. I have tried to stick to the highways, but the byways of theatre history are too tempting at times not to explore. My hope is that this colourful and eventful history will contain something to catch every listener's imagination, and that:

'we shall both make you sad, and tickle ye.'
(Thomas Middleton 1613)

Notes by David Timson

GLOSSARY OF TECHNICAL TERMS NOT FULLY EXPLAINED IN THE TEXT

AMPHITHEATRE – From the Greek *amphi*, around. Literally a theatre that surrounds the action. Developed by the Romans originally for gladiatorial fights, and later drama. The Colosseum is a surviving example.

APRON-STAGE – or Forestage. The part of the stage in front of the proscenium arch, and before the curtain (if there is one). It projects into the auditorium, allowing the actors to be closer to the audience.

BACKCLOTH – The drop-scene at the back of the stage. Usually painted to represent a scene such as a garden or street, or else just blue to depict the sky.

BOX-SET – Used in the 20th century to depict a naturalistic room. Where a setting is made up of 'flats' linked together to give the appearance of solid walls and ceiling.

BUSINESS – A term which describes any action on a stage, comic or serious, which does not involve dialogue, e.g. 'He spends the next two minutes silently tearing up all his manuscripts and throwing them under the table...' (The Seagull)

FLATS – A canvas-fronted frame, tradition-ally placed in rows on both sides of the stage, painted to complement the backcloth,

e.g. in a forest scene, the 'flats' would represent trees. Also used to construct a 'Box-set'.

GROUND-ROW – A low piece of scenery at ground level, painted to depict a grassy bank or low wall. It helps in a conventional setting to give a feeling of depth to the scene.

IMPROVISATION – Where a production is created without a script. The actors rely on their skills of invention for the dialogue and action. It provided the foundation for the Commedia dell'Arte troupes of the 16th century.

MASQUE – Elaborately staged allegorical dramas, involving music, dance and song, with spectacular sets and costumes. They were popular in the courts of Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries, where courtiers and monarchs themselves performed behind the anonymity of masks. The masque contributed to the development of Opera.

PIT – Less expensive seating area of the auditorium, usually behind the stalls (the more expensive seats) on the ground floor. Originally called the 'pit' after part of the Drury Lane theatre built on the site of a cockpit.

PLOT – The story or narrative of a play.

PROSCENIUM ARCH – An often elaborate permanent arch which divides the stage area from the auditorium, through which the audience views the play. Most theatres built during the 19th century placed great emphasis on the proscenium arch being the equivalent of a ‘frame’ for their dramatic ‘pictures’.

PROPS – The everyday articles or properties used by the actors to express character or move the plot along, e.g. spectacles, handbags or letters.

SCENARIO – A summing-up of the main elements in a dramatic narrative. A rough version of the plot. The basis for the Commedia dell’Arte’s improvisations.

STOCK PIECES – Pieces of scenery reused for more than one production, not individually designed, e.g. a Woodland scene. Also applies to reliable plays repeated because of their guaranteed success.

TIRING-HOUSE – The Elizabethan equivalent of the dressing-room.

TRAPS – or Trapdoors. Holes cut in the stage with hinged lids through which actors can descend or ascend as part of the action. Much used in Pantomime, e.g. arrival of the Genie in ‘Aladdin’.

UNITIES – The ‘unities’ refers to the classical concept propounded by Aristotle, that dramatic action should occur in one place and at one time, i.e. the action should not be spread over many years and many locations. It was a strong influence on European playwrights from 16th-18th centuries.

WINGS – The ‘flats’ that define the edge of the acting area, screening off from the audience’s view the sides of the stage where the actors assemble to make their entrances. This off-stage area is also referred to as the ‘wings’.

The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS and MARCO POLO catalogues

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HANDEL CONCERTO GROSSO Op. 6 No. 5, Capella Istropolitana, Jozef Kopelman	8.550157
HANDEL HARPSICHORD SUITE No. 7 G MINOR, Alan Cuckston, harpsichord	8.550416
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Theatre Promotions Ltd 1960/Neabar Investments Ltd 1981/First published in 1960 by Eyre Methuen/Judy Daish Associates Ltd

A Streetcar Named Desire, Tennessee Williams, Rosemary Harris Caedmon/HarperCollins Audio/Rosalie George

Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller, featuring Lee J. Cobb – Caedmon/HarperCollins Audio/Rosalie George

Look Back In Anger, John Osborne – Gordon Dickerson, John Osborne Estate

Waiting for Godot, Samuel Beckett – Curtis Brown

Produced by Nicolas Soames

Post-production: Sarah Butcher, SBS and Simon Weir, CRC

Engineer (speech): Mark Smith, Motivation Sound Studios

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Booklet and cover design: Hannah Whale, Fruition – Creative Concepts. Cover image by Hemesh Alles

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Total running time: 5:10:10

Catalogue no.: 419912

ISBN: 978-962-954-721-9