

## Types of performance glossary: Beginner's guide



Saying you don't like theatre is a bit like saying you don't like cheese. Sure, you might find Brie a bit blah but have you tried Stilton? There are as many **types of performance** as there are styles of literature or genres of film.

We're here to offer you **a quick rundown as to** what each one is. One of them will definitely be for you, we promise.

### Ballet

Dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, ballet is as popular as ever. **Jaw-dropping** to watch, the dance form combines beautiful movement with **back-breaking flexibility** and strength. Ballet's most famous aspect is the **pointe slipper**. These specially adapted shoes allow the dancers **to balance on their toes**. Swan Lake is arguably the most famous ballet of all, but if tutus and Tchaikovsky don't appeal, many modern companies are **bringing ballet bang up to date** and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Cabaret

Not just **a punchy song** sung by Liza Minnelli, cabaret is one of theatre's most colourful, varied and informal types of performance. Cabaret can **feature** anything from music, dance and songs to **drag** and comedy, so check for details before you book. Often cabaret **is performed with table seating**. It is just as likely to be found at a bar as at a theatre.

### Comedy

If theatre seems **a sober pastime**, you've clearly never been to a classic Alan Ayckbourn comedy of errors or heard of Richard Bean's hysterical One Man, Two Guvnors. **Making people smile** has always been **an integral part of theatre**. Thousands of plays are written purely to make the audience **laugh until they cry**. There is even a Best New Comedy prize at the annual Olivier Awards.

### Drama

Of course, not all performances are **a laugh a minute**. A drama is a play or musical that **takes a more serious tone**. A drama may **be designed to stir a social or political debate** or it may just **spin an intriguing** – often emotional – **tale**. The best dramas **leave you seeing the world a little differently...**

## Farce

Slapstick, horseplay and the ridiculous are the pillars of a **romping good farce**. Head to a farce and **you're in for a gloriously silly experience** where **it's likely that whatever can go wrong, will**. Expect **to suspend disbelief and laugh until your belly aches**. Famous farces include Noises Off, Boeing Boeing and, more recently, The Play That Goes Wrong.

## History plays

A history play does exactly what it says on the tin. You **are transported back in time to a dramatic retelling of a historic event**. The most famous history plays are Shakespeare's many fascinating and sometimes **unnervingly relevant** tales of former kings, great battles and **politically pivotal moments in time**.

## Immersive theatre

In recent years, the demand has risen for theatre that puts you, the audience, **bang in the centre of the action**. There's no need to take your seat for **an immersive performance**; instead you might find yourself sleeping on a camp bed for **an overnight performance** of Macbeth in a deserted tower block. Or wearing a mask to become voyeur **as a story unfolds in front of you over multiple floors**. It's the chance to choose your own adventure or **get up close and intimate with the action**.

## Improvisation

You know that **anxiety-ridden dream** you have where you are **on stage** but can't **remember your lines**? Well, some people choose to do this for a living. Throwing out the script, **an improvised performance is entirely made up on the spot** and will likely be very, very funny. You can even go to improvised musicals!

## Kitchen sink drama

Characterised as **intensely real** and often **gritty**, a **kitchen sink drama** is a play that **holds an uncompromising mirror up to humanity and society**. The form developed after the Second World War and is still one of theatre's most popular types of drama.

## Melodrama

A melodrama is **the polar opposite of** a kitchen sink drama. Less common on today's stage, the melodrama **deliberately overplays emotions**, and situations can **verge on the unbelievable**. It's a playful, **over-the-top** form of performance that one day you might just **find yourself in the mood for**.

## Mime

Forget the image of a **monochrome-clad performer**, mime is a **hugely varied art form** that has one central idea: the performers don't speak. Story and character are **played out through movement**, which can create performances that are humorous, **visually spectacular** or **moving**. London even has its own Mime Festival to celebrate **the eclectic talent** in the field.

## Musical

One of theatre's most popular types of performance is the musical; a story told with the help of song and dance. Productions **vary vastly in style**, from the razzmatazz and jazz hands of Chicago to the drama of The Phantom Of The Opera.

## Opera

An opera sees classical performers **sing dramatically** to an epic score, usually **performed by a live orchestra**. There are dozens of famous operas, from La Bohème to La Traviata, but there are also companies writing modern pieces. Operas may be performed in a different language, but there will usually be **captions** – or **surtitles** – above the stage, so you can follow the story.

## Operetta

An operetta can be thought of as “opera light”. It's generally **lighter in tone and content**. Gilbert and Sullivan are England's most famous operetta composers.

## Pantomime

**As English as a cream tea**, pantomime remains one of the country's favourite festive traditions. A Christmas family treat, pantomimes are a **colourful mix of songs, slapstick, terrible puns and good cheer**. They're also often based on traditional stories like Dick Whittington or Cinderella.

## Pastoral

Not so common a style for modern plays, pastoral pieces **portray “rural” life** and are **an ode to country living**. The most famous **pastoral play** is arguably Shakespeare's As You Like It, **set in** the fictional Forest of Arden.

## Physical theatre

Physical theatre **hit the mainstream with** companies such as Frantic Assembly and the West End's beloved production of The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time. It mixes straight drama with **cleverly choreographed**,

**stylised movement.** This physicality can do anything from **conjuring up** a plane on stage using just the performers' bodies to showing **the inner workings of a character's mind** or **bringing vibrancy to scene changes**.

## **Tragedy**

It could be a **weepie**, it could be **gruesome** or it could be **a plot of treachery** but tragedies all have one thing in common: there's not going to be **a happy ending**. You might need tissues or a stiff drink for after the (hopefully not too bloody) ending.

## **Two-/three-hander**

Types of performance vary from boasting **ensemble casts** in their dozens to much smaller, more intimate **companies of actors**. It's very common for plays to **have just two or three actors in the cast**, hence the terms **two-hander** and **three-hander**.