

Little Known Facts, Myths, and Legends

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Why is it called a green room?

Theatre people are naturally inclined toward storytelling, so what we don't know we sometimes just make up. Many explanations for why the offstage actors' lounge is called a green room are great stories, and some of them have roots in history. But none of them have any real claim to truth:

- Early stage light (limelight) was green, so actors could only accurately put their makeup on in a room painted green.
- Actors hung out in the room where all the stage topiary was stored.
- Early stages were outside on the "green."
- The lounge was painted green because it was calming.
- The ticket money (the "green") was counted in this room after the show.

Since we don't have a real answer on this, here's a list of "green" places with answers:

- A green room – any environmentally friendly room in a building.
- The Green Room – one of three state parlors at the White House; appropriately, the walls are green.
- The green room – in surfing, this is the lovely, watery green place inside the curl of a wave. It is also loud and requires excellent balance to visit.

What do you do when someone shouts, "Heads"?

Stagehands shout "Heads!" as a warning that something is falling. It could be a wrench, a cell phone, an out-of-balance lineset – anything that responds to gravity and has become suddenly unrestrained.

Truthfully, you do one of two things:

- Cower and cover your head defensively with your arms, awaiting a painful blow from the falling object.
- Look up with your mouth open, leaving your teeth and fragile facial bones vulnerably exposed to the falling object.

Sadly, more of us do the second than the first.

Is it a theatre or an auditorium? What's the difference?

Well, friends, as far as language goes, "theatre" comes from the ancient Greek word "theatron," meaning "a place for seeing". "Auditorium" comes from the Latin for "a place for hearing." Interestingly enough, we haven't adopted a word that means "a place for seeing, hearing, and opening hard candies during the quiet bits." But we're not just talking about language, are we?

The dividing line between a theatre and an auditorium in practice is far blurrier and says as much about the speaker as it does about the room. Even in this small office, opinions vary. A lot. The only consensus seems to be that rooms dedicated to artistic performance tend to be called theatres, while rooms for lectures or multi-purpose uses are more often called auditoriums.

So. Is it a place for seeing or a place for hearing? It's both. Unless you're at a mime show, and then it's just one.

Why isn't it OK to whistle on stage?

Theatres used to hire sailors as stagehands – often as riggers, because they knew how to handle ropes and tie knots, and occasionally as costumers, because they knew how to sew from repairing sails, ropes, and nets.

Before walkie-talkies and headsets, cues were called using whistled commands the sailors knew from their day jobs at sea. If someone whistled a happy tune backstage, they might accidentally call a cue and drop the mountain backdrop into the drawing room scene, roll a wagon over the stage manager's foot, or close the curtain before the murderer is revealed.

This is a case of 'old superstitions die hard,' since we don't whistle cues anymore, and haven't for a long, long time.

And about that Scottish play...

As far as crusty old superstitions go, this is one of the theatre world's crustiest. Technicians and actors alike avoid saying "Macbeth" inside the theatre, lest it bring bad luck to their production. Explanations are many and varied but, like most superstitions, refuse to be pinned down to one truthful, factual event. The best we've heard is that early players believed the witches' incantations in the play were truly curses, and that productions of Macbeth were suitably plagued with disasters brought on by the scripted spells. Avoidance strategies include referring to the play as "the Scottish play" or "the M word," and calling the main character by one of his many other titles, such as the Thane of Cawdor or Prince of Denmark. Wait, that's another show...

Luckily, you can undo the spells by spinning in place and spitting. Good thing, or we'd have to hear the quote, "For brave M-word, well he deserves that name..."

Theatre ghosts and the ghost light

Many theatres claim to be haunted – sometimes with kindly, arts-loving souls, but more often with mischievous imps who hide makeup and small props, leave lights on, and lock important stage access doors right before the diva's cue.

But wait! Before you assume that the theatre is peopled with complete whack jobs, see our comment on "Why is it called a Green Room?": Theatre people are naturally inclined toward storytelling, so what we don't know we sometimes just make up. We can amend that to include: it's easier to blame small disasters on a ghost than pin it on the real and likely perpetrator – me. Combine a dislike of facing consequences with a talent for storytelling and voilà! Enter the theatre ghost.

The single bulb on a stick, sitting in the middle of a dark stage at the end of each night, is the ghost light. Ostensibly, it is left on in the darkened theatre to keep the ghost company, so he doesn't get angry and ruin the production. Legally, it is left on so the first people into the theatre in the morning don't trip over bits of scenery or fall off the stage, get angry, and sue the production. But which story do you think will get that last tired guy to remember to turn on the ghost light at night?

Theatre vs. Theater

In a striking example of two cultures being divided by a common language, the UK and the US have each grafted their own labyrinthine rules, usages, and spellings to English. Never mind that English is already a stew of words borrowed from other languages, making spelling anything a feat of memorization. Ignore that English seems able to shed any and all attempts to apply concrete patterns of usage, the resulting host of “exceptions to the rule” terrorizing schoolchildren all over the world. And finally, thank Noah Webster for naughtily thumbing his nose at the British during the early 1800s by peppering his new dictionary with the revolutionary concept of American spelling.

In American English, theatre and theater are correctly used interchangeably. That doesn't stop most Americans from having an opinion about which way is wrong and which way is right. Some grammarians split hairs, using theatre for the art form and theater for the building. Artsy types tend to prefer theatre, opening themselves up to being labeled pompous, pretentious, or worse yet, unabashed anglophiles. TPC falls firmly in that category, using theatre exclusively unless the proper name of the building is spelled the other (wrong) way. We reject the labels, though.

Drama vs. Theatre

To tackle the differences between *drama* and *theatre*, we turned to etymology; but on discovering that etymology was not the close study of Entenmann's chocolate-glazed doughnuts, we moved on to other, simpler things.

Drama and *theatre* often mean the same thing, sometimes mean similar things, and other times are so separate in their definitions that to mix the two would be absurd. Let's break it down to the most basic of building blocks.

Drama: events unfolding or emotions unfurling that insist upon your immediate attention. Whether real life or staged doesn't matter to the meaning of the word.

Theatre: the art form that happens from doing (staged) drama in person in front of an audience. Usually includes getting some money in exchange, but is sometimes given away for free. Also used to describe the building where the art occurs.

How do I get where I want to go onstage without looking like the new guy?

Stage directions are not relative. They are based on one imaginary actor standing at the center of the stage, facing the audience. His left is stage left. His right is stage right. If you stand facing him, stage left is to your right. If you stand with your right shoulder facing him and your left shoulder facing the audience, stage right is directly in front of you. This is the theatre world equivalent of telling actors “it's not all about you.” They don't believe it, but they learn the directions anyway.

What about upstage and downstage? Early stages were often raked—higher in the back than the front—so the audience could see the actors better. Upstage was up the rake, toward the back. Downstage was down the rake, toward the front. We've lost the rakes, but retained the directions: up is back, down is front. Early actors being similar to current actors, we imagine downstage was often littered with cast members fighting for attention, while upstage remained an empty wasteland populated only by scenery.

Think these directions are a little confusing? Try applying them in a theatre-in-the-round. Hilarity will ensue.

Odds and Ends

A dramatic theatre piece is a “play,” but the root of “opera,” opus, means work. We think this highlights how straight-play people and opera people see themselves more than anything else.

French for audience is assistance. We think the French have it right on this one—a performance cannot happen without an audience, so they really are helping.