

# WITHIN THE THEATRE: STAGE, AUDIENCE, PERFORMANCE

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## Introduction

Let's now enter the theatre. It is 5 o'clock, the time when most performances usually start and we get ready in the evening to witness, as was common, two successive performances; one longer show followed by a shorter one with comic undertones. So how were you seated in these auditoriums?

## Part 1 – In the stalls

Well, if you belonged to the lower classes, you were sat in the stalls; the lowest part of the audience. Until 1782, you'd be standing and packed tightly in amongst a rowdy and extremely diverse crowd. The cultivated middle class stood alongside the lower classes. They were especially outspoken. Incidentally, they would often take over the show. It was quite common for the performance to be disrupted by jeers and taunts from the stalls.

The success of a performance, therefore, depended entirely on the attitude of this hot-headed crowd. By the bye, numerous attempts were made by actors to win over the audience to their cause by buying off a part of the audience so that they'd applaud their performance or even boo that of their adversary. This well-established scheme, which everyone resorted to from Voltaire to Beaumarchais, was called "cabal".

Moreover, this lively audience in the stalls was also often very receptive to the civilising mission of the play, at least that's what philosophers would have us believe. In the article "Parterre" in the *Encyclopaedia* for example, Marmontel hails the spectators who have been saved from the corruption, taste and judgement which reigned above, that's to say in the boxes where the aristocrats were seated. More often than not, the aristocrats came to the theatre and the opera to be seen, to hold court.

Whatever it be, the atmosphere in the audience, which was consistently electric throughout the duration of the performance, has nothing to do with the solemn silence which is commonly found in our theatres today. Let's now take a look at the architecture of the auditorium.

## Part 2 – Poorly-adapted spaces

In the first half of the century, before the construction of new theatres, rooms were often used which dated from the 17th century. Certainly, reconfigurations were made, but the acoustics were bad, there was only partial visibility and the light was gloomy. The set-up of the room, often rectangular like at the Hotel of Bourgogne, was poorly adapted to performance conditions. The clear separation between stage and audience that we know today did not exist.

On stage, right where the actors were performing, spectators were sat on benches, conforming to a tradition which dated back to the time of Corneille. These seats, which incidentally were the most expensive, were occupied by aristocrats who'd engage the crowd when they were not interfering with the actors' performances. They would also disrupt the set-up of theatrical illusions, which were called out for by philosophers and playwrights like Voltaire then Diderot who were seeking believability, realism and new dramatic effects. By the bye, they would win their case in 1759 with a reform which finally got rid of spectators on stage. The path was soon cleared for new dramatic devices.

As such, in the second half of the century, architects and engineers began looking at ways to integrate this new concept of dramatic space into the design of the room itself. They were sketching trapezium-shaped, horseshoe-shaped, eclipse-shaped rooms but, above all, it was the semi-circle which took hold in the last decades of the century, like here, at the Besançon theatre conceived by Ledoux. Here, the democratic and grandiose imaginary world of the classical amphitheatre is married with the civic design of the theatre glorified by the Enlightenment.

Because fundamentally, and this is what we'll take away in conclusion, the auditorium is like a microcosm of society which reproduces social organisation within the Ancient Regime. The aim of the architect, therefore, is to preserve the contradictory balance between the egalitarian ideal held by the classical reference and the subtle class hierarchy of social order. At Besançon, going back to our example, the architect Ledoux has mastered the balance, notably by combining the idea of boxes, which imitate hierarchy, and that of layered tiers which are incidentally relegated to the upper layers of the auditorium.