Broadway. Street in New York on or near which are situated most of the important commercial New York theatres; hence Broadway as a generic term implies much the same as West End or Shaftesbury Avenue, suggesting commercial as distinct from experimental theatre. The latter is generally known as OFF-BROADWAY.

Business. An actor’s smaller actions on the stage designed to illuminate character and/or occupy him believably when he is not the focus of attention.

Chorus. A group of actors in Greek drama. They were at first the main performers, tragedy consisting initially of a series of choric odes with interludes in which a single actor conversed with the chorus. Gradually, they came to occupy the role of commentators on the dramatic action, standing for the most part aside from it but representing townspeople and sometimes engaging as such in exchanges with the principal actors. In Elizabethan drama a ‘chorus’ sometimes occurs in the person of an individual actor speaking a prologue and occasional explanatory linking passages (in Henry V and Pericles, for example). In the modern theatre there have been sporadic returns to the idea of a chorus (usually now a single actor) as commentator on the action, stepping in and out of it at will (in various plays by or influenced by Brecht: The Caucasian Chalk Circle, A Man for All Seasons, The Entertainer: the Women of Canterbury in Murder in the Cathedral; the narrator in Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie). The term ‘chorus’ in the modern theatre more usually refers, though, to the singers and dancers in musicals and operettas, who play a more or less background role varying a the occasion demands.

Closet drama. Generic term for drama written to be read rather than acted. Most of the Romantic poets wrote at least one play of this sort, in effect if not always in intention: Shelley, THE CENCI (1818), PROMETHEUS UNBOUND (1819); Keats, OTHOTHEGREAT (1820): Byron, MANFRED
Comic opera. Apart from its obvious meaning as an opera which happens to have a humorous plot, the term ‘comic opera’ often occurs, like its French equivalent opera comique, as applied to dramatic shows with spoken dialogue and songs and dances (e.g., the works of Offenbach or Gilbert and Sullivan). The plot of these need not be essentially comic; it may be romantic and even, as with The Yeoman of the Guard, have tragic elements. Towards the end of the nineteenth century this genre came more generally to be known as operetta (see Musical Comedy).

Covent Garden. The first theatre on the site opened in 1732, under the management of John Rich, but did not achieve glory until it was taken over in 1767 by a management including George Colman the Elder, and saw the first production of She Stoops to Conquer in 1773. In 1808 the theatre was burnt down, and rebuilt on much grander lines as the home of four companies: opera, ballet, and players of tragedy and comedy. Among the actors to perform there during this period were Kemble, Mrs Siddons, Kean, Macready, and Madame Vestris. Since the 1850s the theatre has been devoted almost entirely to opera and ballet; it was burnt down again in 1856, and the present building, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, dates from 1858.

Downstage. Towards the front of the stage, near the audience.

Fourth wall. Concept of the naturalistic theatre, according to which the proscenium arch represents the fourth wall of the room in which the action of the play takes place, removed for the benefit of the audience but without any of the performers taking cognizance of the fact.

Mime. Literally ‘representation’ (from the Greek). In the ancient world both popular and literary forms existed: the former being broad comic shows with a strong emphasis on action and gesture, the latter literary monologues and dialogues often, though not always, meant to be read rather than acted. In modern usage mime means specifically acting without speech; it evolved from certain aspects of the Commedia Dell’ Arte and, as well as being used as a part of the ballet’s and straight drama’s repertory of expression, has found a place as a theatrical entertainment in its own right. In the early nineteenth century the great mime artist was the Frenchman Debureau and the form has subsequently been practised more in France than elsewhere; a revival begun in the 1920s by Etienne Decroux has subsequently found such powerful advocates as Jean-Louis Barrault and Marcel Marceau.