

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Time is short, art is long.

—Goethe, *Faust, Part I*

THE IDEA FOR THIS book dates back to the summer of 2000. Sitting on a concrete bench at a world's fair in Hanover, Germany, eating Asian-fusion fast food with some remarkably sociable Germans I had just met during one of the ten intermissions for Peter Stein's twenty-one-hour *Faust I + II*, I was struck with *déjà vu*. I had been here before, I felt—an international pilgrim to a theater event of extraordinary length and gargantuan ambition, breaking bread with normally reticent strangers turned gregarious comrades merely because our prolonged exposure to one another and common interest in a play had melded us into an impromptu community.

By 2000, I had been attending theater regularly for two decades—in the United States and Germany, to a lesser extent in England and France—but I had never consciously gravitated to lengthy productions (not even in Germany, where they are particularly prevalent). In Hanover, I suddenly realized I had seen more than a dozen, some well before I became a theater critic and professor. During college and graduate school I had seen the eight-and-a-half-hour novel adaptation *Nicholas Nickleby* by the Royal Shakespeare Company and Robert Wilson and Philip Glass's five-hour, theater-of-images "portrait opera" *Einstein on the Beach*. Later I saw Peter Brook's eleven-hour adaptation of the Sanskrit epic *The Mahabharata* and Ariane Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides*, a ten-hour Kathakali-inspired *Oresteia* with Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis* added as a prequel. Among the others were Robert Lepage's seven-hour, globe-circling meditation on Hiroshima, *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*, and new American historical dramas by Tony Kushner and Robert Schenkkan that, shockingly, appeared on Broad-

way—the seven-hour *Angels in America* and six-hour *The Kentucky Cycle*. These works were breathtakingly diverse, and at first I wondered whether they shared anything more significant than their great length.

Length is, after all, one of those quantitative measures that cultivated people tend to think of as secondary in assessing artworks. We easily accept that size matters in other areas of human endeavor, but with works of the imagination that acceptance is contingent. Surely all questions of content are more urgent and important than the question of how long a play is, or a film, an orchestral work, or a novel. A fundamental tenet of Western creativity since romanticism has been that art legislates for itself: good works are as long as they need to be, no more, no less. What is more, we children of the era of big-screen “epics” and marketing campaigns wielding “marathon” as an empty gimmick are all too aware that length alone guarantees nothing.

As I mulled things over, though, I saw reasons why these productions fit meaningfully together. For one basic matter, they had all played havoc with normal playgoing routines. They were endurance feats for their audiences as well as their performers, holding us for whole days and evenings at a time. Sometimes they immersed me in a conjured world so deeply that I felt transported to a different time-space and, despite my muscle aches, I felt truly sorry when the piece ended. For another thing, these long works offered rare and precious experiences of sustained meditation; each had been a tonic against the endemic “hurry sickness” of the media era, with its compulsive multitasking, sixty-second sitcoms, pop-ups within pop-ups, and epidemic attention deficit disorder. Most of us suffer this sickness in screen-bound isolation, yet these theatrical marathons offered relief from that too. Most had taken place in specially outfitted theaters or unusual, out-of-the-way locations people had to trek to, such as a quarry, an island, a converted factory, a warehouse, or a world’s fair. There they generated an uncommon sense of public communion that transformed throngs of atomized consumers into congregations of skeptical co-religionists, or at least consciously commiserating co-sufferers.

Great Lengths is the fruit of my effort to understand why. It is a series of six essays about seven marathon productions that I saw between 1980 and 2009, most of which were sold to the American and European publics with massive and vulgar publicity campaigns as sensational media “events” but all of which were, in my view, artworks of major stature that sustained my sometimes flagging belief that the theater still occasionally serves great

masters. The book is not a systematic or historical study of marathon theater—by which I simply mean any production longer than four hours or so (a “full-length” theatrical experience is normally about two or three hours long, and has been for centuries in the Western world).

My subject is really a special class of experience that I discuss in historical context in the next section of this introduction. The chapter-essays are case studies, close readings that expand to explore general ideas drawn from the examples, with each example chosen because it taught me something fundamental about the theater, made some powerful impression that formed or transformed my sense of the art’s range of possibility in basic ways. Perhaps in that sense the book is as much about the development of my theatrical sensibility as it is about long plays. In any case, the essays subject my impressions to critical scrutiny with the help of video recordings, interviews, and a broad range of secondary writings both directly related to the productions and not. As mentioned, most of these works were extremely high-profile, reviewed widely, and seen by tens of thousands in the theater and millions on television later.

Reviews and television adaptations cannot re-create the experience of seeing the productions in the theater, however. I am concerned, as I hope is obvious, solely with works that earned their length artistically, that clearly *needed* it to accomplish extraordinarily ambitious aims, and that *needed* the theater. We are all painfully aware of the ubiquity of unbearable long theater—productions merely prolonged due to egomania, ineptitude, indiscipline, or other such failings. I set those commonplaces aside for the sake of some unforgettable exceptions. Lengthy productions place the theater under unique pressure. They are unforgiving crucibles from which artistic ideas and approaches emerge either hopelessly broken and disproved or unforgettablely bright and persuasive. The theater is more itself in them, one might say, because it has a chance to realize essential powers and potentialities that shrink from view when the art must serve the strictures of compulsory brevity.

A Historical Brief on Length

Lengthy theater is nothing new. Audiences in ancient Athens watched tragedies and comedies from dawn until dusk during the dramatic competitions of the City Dionysia Festival. During the late Middle Ages in western Europe, ordinary townspeople attended and helped stage elaborate out-

door productions of biblical plays lasting an entire day or more in conjunction with the holiday of Corpus Christi. Numerous Asian theater traditions have always involved all-day or all-night performances, often associated with religious or secular rituals and timed to agricultural cycles. The modern Western dramatic canon includes many hallowed long works such as Goethe's *Faust*, Wagner's *Parsifal*, and Ibsen's *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, as well as many less hallowed long twentieth-century plays such as Paul Claudel's *Le soulier de satin* (*The Satin Slipper*), Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, and Rolf Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* (*The Deputy*). Lengthy theater is in no sense a historical aberration; it is a sporadic occurrence with different social and artistic causes at different times.

Furthermore, interestingly enough, the impulse to establish a norm of dramatic length also dates back to antiquity. Aristotle spoke of it in his *Poetics*, the founding document of Western dramatic theory, written in the fourth century B.C., employing a nature metaphor. "Beauty depends on size and order," he said:

Hence neither can a very tiny creature turn out to be beautiful (since our perception of it grows blurred as it approaches the period of imperceptibility) nor an excessively huge one (for then it cannot all be perceived at once and so its unity and wholeness are lost), if for example there were a creature a thousand miles long—so, just as in the case of living creatures they must have some size, but one that can be taken in in a single view, so with plots: they should have length, but such that they are easy to remember.¹

The core principle behind this ideal is unity: a good drama is one that can be surveyed completely, as an organic whole. It must not be too short, Aristotle says elsewhere, or it will lack "magnitude," which evidently means quantity and complexity of incident as well as length. But it must also not be too long—so "excessively huge" that its incidents cannot be held in the memory all at once. The *Poetics* declares drama a "superior" form to epic in the end precisely because of its greater unity and "concentration." "Several tragedies come from one epic," Aristotle writes, whereas the opposite cannot be true because epic action is "diluted with a great deal of time." "If someone should put Sophocles' *Oedipus* in as many verses as the *Iliad*," he writes, the result would be ridiculous.²

This principle of unity has been of overwhelming importance in Western theater during the five centuries since the *Poetics* was rediscovered by

Italian humanists and transformed into a rulebook for dramatic art. The pervasive influence of the *Poetics* is the main reason why good plays have long been considered models of creative efficiency. Aristotle's text was not well known in antiquity, however, and may originally have been nothing more than a contribution to a private academic debate among students in his school. Importantly, the *Poetics* has nothing to say about the performative context of drama in classical Greece, the festival environment that is surely the most illuminating frame in which to view the Athenians's custom of spending whole days in the theater.

The City Dionysia, the largest and most prestigious occasion for drama in ancient Athens, was an elaborate and expensive weeklong affair so important to the city that it continued even through the most straitened years of the Peloponnesian War (and for some six centuries afterward). It included four days entirely filled with plays and had other purposes as well. Scheduled in the spring when the local harvest was complete and people could afford to leave work, and when sea travel was easy and Athens was teeming with foreign visitors, it included ritual celebrations of the god Dionysus and, in David Wiles's words, "ceremonies which Athens wanted the rest of Greece to witness": for example, the garish display of tribute payments by territories that Athens had conquered, and the formal presentation of state-funded armor to young men whose fathers had died fighting for the city.³ Wealthy Athenians, though sometimes reluctant, considered it an honor to underwrite this patriotic event by financing one of the playwrights, and the conduct of the sponsors was publicly judged afterward, as was the behavior of audiences.

The City Dionysia was part of what the scholar Rush Rehm has called a thoroughly pervasive "performance culture" in Athens comparable to an "ongoing feast."⁴ Athenians devoted more than one hundred days each year to such festivals, their chief form of religious observance, and considered them integral to the ongoing life of the city. They typically began with a formal procession, a sacrifice, and a feast, followed by contests of some kind, such as athletic events or musical competitions, at which the audiences acted as judges. The religious festivals, in other words, were just as suffused with the participatory and argumentative spirit of the agora (public commons) as the democratic institutions were. Those institutions, in turn—the Assembly and the law courts—were inherently theatrical: large public gatherings in which orators proposed civic or military policy, or debated legal adversaries, while amphitheaters full of their compatriots listened and

judged. Wiles says that these gatherings provided the structural model for tragedy: “Almost everything said in Greek drama is said with a view to impressing the chorus.”⁵

The long hours that the Athenians devoted to drama in the City Dionysia, then, were part of a solemn civic and religious obligation. The plays were an occasion for communal reckoning that happened also to be a form of mass entertainment. Wiles says that the productions, which included extravagant dancing and singing, were “more akin to pop concerts or sporting events than any modern form of theatre,” but this comparison understates their underlying seriousness.⁶ The crowds were immense, numbering 12,000–15,000 or more, and the stage effects were no doubt crude rather than intimate, but the plays were not crude. The winning works were praised for their subtle arguments and language, and spectators—who brought food and wine to sustain them through the long days—vocally expressed approval and disapproval of specific passages and turns of events. The Athenians lingered in their theater because they cherished this forum for contemplating what they owed to one another and to their gods as citizens, as critics and judges, and as fellow humans.

Remarkably, two and a half millennia later, our modern notions of tragedy still strongly reflect this deliberative performance concept. Aristotle notwithstanding (of which more in a moment), our views of the tragic today generally form around the notion of recognized and shared suffering, of communal bonds forged by transcendent expressions of suffering and its inevitability for human beings. Here is Peter Stein’s view, from a 2005 interview:

The essence of human existence consists in a paradox: that the human being is born to die. Death and birth belong together; that is why one can also say that the only human being who can be called happy is the one who was never born. Tragedy draws its life from this contradictory statement. It gets right to the point of the paradoxical essence of life, and it’s obviously only possible to speak the truth about this with the mendacious, peculiar, fictional methods of the theater.⁷

In a 2007 interview, I asked Stein what experience he hoped people would have generally in his numerous long-duration productions (which have included a nine-hour *Oresteia*, a ten-hour *Wallenstein* trilogy, and *Faust I + II*), and he answered: “To have a theater day. Clearly I took all the inspira-

tion from Greek tragedy, because Greek tragedy was always organized as a theater day.”⁸

It is decidedly curious that Aristotle went to the trouble of defining ideal dramatic length without ever mentioning this circumstance of the “theater day.” As a longtime Athenian resident, he was well aware that the tragic playwrights in the City Dionysia were each required to present four plays—three tragedies and a satyr play—on their assigned day of competition, yet the *Poetics* says nothing about the unity of the daily programs. Perhaps the programs were no longer regarded as integral artworks in Aristotle’s lifetime (384–322 B.C.), when new tragedies equal in stature to the fifth-century classics were no longer being written. In Aeschylus’s day (525–456), each tragedian was expected to compose a connected trilogy—as in *The Oresteia*, our only complete extant example—with the satyr play providing a comic lampoon on the same theme. But that tradition ended with Sophocles (496–406), for unknown reasons, who evidently competed only with three independent tragedies and a satyr play linked loosely by theme. Since Sophocles was Aristotle’s model playwright, we can surmise that his silence on this subject expressed a preference—for Sophocles over Aeschylus, and for the concise and efficient structure of individual, freestanding plays over the expansive structure of trilogies. Whatever the value of that preference, though, we are left with a paradox: the theorist who enshrined the concise, efficient Sophoclean form as the Western world’s ideal dramatic structure watched dramas as part of extravagant, multipart, all-day affairs.

In classical Japanese culture there is a theory of unity that was conceived for varied, all-day programs as well as single plays, and it is pertinent to this discussion. This is the principle of *jo-ha-kyu*, first described by the founding figure of Noh theater, Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443), in his theater treatises and later adopted as a basic principle in Japanese music, dance, martial arts, and other fields. Noh theater was typically performed in five-play programs lasting most of a full day in Zeami’s time, and *jo-ha-kyu* originally referred to an ideal rhythmic structure (*jo*—“beginning”; *ha*—“breaking” or “scattering”; *kyu*—“rapid” closure) for both the individual plays and the whole-day programs. Zeami:

Since the term *jo* means “beginning,” the *waki sarugaku* that begins a day’s performance should be a play that reveals the authentic nature of our art. Such a play should have a simple source, be constructed without any complex detail, be felicitous in nature, and have a plot that is easy to follow. Song and dance

should be the main elements in such a play. . . . Plays that occupy the third place on the program fall into the *ha* category. Whereas plays in the *jo* category concentrate on a simple and straightforward manner of presentation, plays in the *ha* category place an emphasis on complexity of expression Plays in this category form the central element in the day's entertainment. . . . *Kyu* represents the last memento of the day, a play appropriate for such an ending. The term *ha* requires breaking the mood of *jo*, and is an art that brings complexity and great artistic skill to the performance. *Kyu*, on the other hand, extends the art of *ha* in turn, in order to represent the final stage of the process. In this fashion *kyu* brings on powerful movements, rapid dance steps, as well as fierce and strong gestures, in order to dazzle the eyes of the spectators. Agitation characterizes this final stage of the *no*.⁹

Jo-ha-kyu brings Aristotle's discussion of "beginning, middle, and end" to mind, but here the theory is much more refined, flexible, and broadly applied. Zeami describes its use in small contexts as well as large ones, speaking for instance of the *jo-ha-kyu* of individual scenes and the delivery of single lines and words. He uses it to describe the proper handling of last-minute program adjustments, such as when one or more plays must be suddenly added to a daily Noh schedule at the whim of a noble patron. The enduring resonance of the concept is in its general view of aesthetic framing, which rests on the Zen Buddhist assumption that *jo-ha-kyu* is a fundamental rhythm of nature. The lives and careers of people, the histories and destinies of nations and empires, even the songs of birds and the life cycles of plants, may be described in these terms. Artists and critics commonly use *jo-ha-kyu* to speak of the modulation and organization of any time-based artistic activity with an eye toward satisfaction. "When the day's program has been completed," Zeami writes, "the public's expression of appreciation comes because the *jo*, *ha*, and *kyu* of the day have reached successful Fulfillment." "It is that instant of Fulfillment in an artistic work that gives the audience a sensation of novelty."¹⁰

Cultures far removed from the modern West tend to have very different conceptions of time from ours, so direct comparisons of conventions can be misguided. Time is often referred to in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, for instance, as a wheel or cycle rather than as an arrow or vector, as in the West. The *jo-ha-kyu* concept, however, has great resonance for Westerners because it treats time as a vector and is not exclusively tied to the slow

serenity of Noh. We can easily interpret *jo-ha-kyu* as a general principle of tripartite form (exposition, development, climax) with echoes in the three-act drama, the sonata, the Hegelian dialectic, and much, much more. Peter Brook seems to have been the first contemporary Westerner to notice the concept's usefulness for structuring marathon theater. He has often mentioned *jo-ha-kyu* during his decades-long search for theatrical practices that could transcend national and linguistic boundaries, and in a 2010 interview he told me that he and the playwright Jean-Claude Carrière had found it useful in their struggle to construct a drama from the monstrously unwieldy epic material of *The Mahabharata*:

There was a sense that the first act prepares, the second act develops, and the third act culminates. . . . Whenever we would come to a certain point, we'd feel, now something must develop. It's a second part and it's not taking you farther, so there's a problem. And if the next part wasn't *kyu*, wasn't culminating, then that was something to be solved. You can also think of it as a pattern from a dark beginning, to light, to apotheosis. And this pattern can also be found within the parts. The graying thing in the third part of *The Mahabharata*, for example, has to have its own *jo-ha-kyu* within it, a build to intensity to give the sense of a light saved, a sense of the sun rising only for a moment.¹¹

In a fascinating 2009 book called *The Infinity of Lists*, Umberto Eco describes yet another theoretical framework for artistic form that offers a countermodel to both Aristotle's and Zeami's models. I will use this framework in chapter 6 to approach the determinedly non-Aristotelian marathon performances by the experimental company Forced Entertainment. Eco's book explores the list as a structuring principle in visual and literary art throughout history: from Homer's lengthy catalog of the Greek military leaders in *The Iliad*, to Baroque and Renaissance paintings depicting multitudes extending to apparent infinity beyond their picture frames, to medieval lists of angels and attributes of God that continue for pages, to obsessively compiled cabinets of curiosities, to James Joyce's puns on hundreds of river-names in *Finnegans Wake*. Eco says that such protracted listing gestures stand in opposition to the basic Aristotelian principle of consolidated form and definition of things by essence in most artistic creation. "The opposition between form and list refers to two ways of knowing and defining things," Eco writes, and the list mode is of use

where we do not know the boundaries of what we wish to portray, where we do not know how many things we are talking about and presume their number to be, if not infinite, then at least astronomically large. We cannot provide definition by essence and so, to be able to talk about it, to make it comprehensible or in some way perceivable, we list its properties.¹²

Listing is “definition by properties,” and

We use definition by properties when we don’t have or are not satisfied by a definition by essence; hence it is proper to both a primitive culture that has still to construct a hierarchy of genera and species, or to a mature culture (maybe even one in crisis) that is bent on casting doubt on all previous definitions.¹³

Forced Entertainment’s work is suffused with this sort of doubt—above all doubt concerning received definitions of drama. It should be obvious how unsuited the list mode is to drama as traditionally understood as the epitome of efficient, integrated artistic form.

In fact, turning our attention to the Corpus Christi cycle plays of the European Middle Ages, we may easily find that it is the lack of such a principle of unity that most egregiously distances them from us today. These lengthy theater events—also called Mysteries in homage to the craft guilds that produced them (each profession considered its expertise a “mystery”)—began in the late fourteenth century and flourished in numerous countries for about two hundred years, most popularly in England. They were annual, all-day (sometimes multiday) affairs that sought to enact the entirety of divine history, from Creation to Doomsday, in a series of biblical episode-dramas. Each episode was produced by a different team and performed on a separate pageant wagon with a mostly separate cast, and the overall cycles were patchwork compositions by multiple authors who added plays to the sequence over many years, rarely bothering to adjust older plays to new ones. As V. A. Kolve has written: the cycles had no “consecutive impulse.” Although they were connected by a theological pattern of prefiguration (New Testament stories foreshadowed in Old Testament stories), they were “not built upon a theory of direct causation: Noah’s thank-offering does not cause the offering of Isaac by Abraham, nor in any sense lead to it, even though the two actions are played in sequence, with complete disregard of the intervening years.”¹⁴ The Corpus Christi events were not unified, in other words, in either Aristotle’s or Zeami’s sense.

The aspect of these works that has nevertheless long exerted a powerful grip on the Western imagination is their participatory zeal. They represent the first major flowering of vernacular drama in western Europe after its almost complete disappearance for more than a millennium—which is what made them such powerful wellsprings of inventive energy. By allowing them, the church opened emotional floodgates that had long restricted theatrical enjoyment and creativity in the lay public. That public, largely illiterate and burdened by drudgery, disease, poverty, and exploitation, had seen theater in churches since at least the twelfth century, in somber liturgical dramas chanted in Latin by priests and monks. But Corpus Christi transferred the production responsibility to the people. The holiday was established in 1311 as an early summer celebration of God’s gift of the Holy Sacrament to mankind, and as it evolved into a weeklong festival, it became the first large forum for plays in local languages outside churches since Roman times.

The texts were written by church officials and organized by municipal authorities, but they were lovingly and skillfully produced by local craft and trade guilds and acted by ordinary men and women from the local populace. Their preparation and performance were thus a prized annual period of playful release from the grim routine of the commoners’ everyday lives. The plays used Bible stories to illustrate the repeated miracle of salvation-despite-sin in case after mytho-historical case, but they were saturated with delightful and sensational hocus-pocus effects, realistic local color and humor, and knockabout excitement. The scenes were all set in the current era, according to convention (no important distinction was made between historical periods), which gave audiences an intense connection to the performances. As William Tydeman writes, the cycles were objects “of intense civic pride” and “frequent inter-communal rivalry.”¹⁵

The main reason they stand out so sharply in theater history is that they consumed the attention and energy of whole English towns for days. The Cornwall and Chester cycles each took three days to perform.¹⁶ The forty-eight-play York cycle, the longest extant, began with a gathering of pageant wagons at 4:30 a.m., after which (in one of several possible production scenarios) the wagons proceeded through the streets and stopped to present their plays in sequence at twelve prearranged stations, where refreshments and other accommodations were provided by businesses that paid a fee to locate their stations there. This cycle lasted at least fifteen hours, ending at dusk or, as one source has it, continued in torchlight until after midnight.¹⁷

No matter what view one takes of the motivation for this tradition—“awakening and releasing a pent-up body of religious knowledge and religious feeling” (Hardin Craig), or convincing “the frivolous rich and the covetous tradesman . . . to re-dedicate society to Christ” (Glynne Wickham)—the scale of the communal exertion stuns.¹⁸ These medieval Christians were no slavish agents of authority. They were acting on their own passionate need both to play and to reassure themselves about God’s master plan for humankind. That is why they created a theatrical immersion experience in which they could imagine *themselves* as players in the grand historical drama of Man, whose promised end was the permanent end of their misery in the Final Judgment.

It was during the era of resurgent secular drama that followed the Mysteries, the late sixteenth century, that the general expectation arose in the West that a theater performance would normally be two to three hours long. A few lengthier theatrical traditions continued in religious contexts through that era and beyond, notably in Jesuit colleges throughout Europe, but for the most part the lengthier traditions faded, casualties of the Reformation and the increased availability of professional theater. Protestantism was a big factor, introducing a new ethic of efficient use of time as well as a mistrust of idleness. Many Protestants (particularly English Puritans) regarded theater as a frivolous and immoral activity (as did many devout Catholics in France and elsewhere), and this circumstance deeply colored the atmosphere in which professional theater grew. Public companies had to balance a desire to please crowds with a need to step carefully around enemies determined to minimize their influence. John Northbrooke’s famous antitheatrical text, “A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes” (1577), begins with an objection to the “prodigality” of theatergoing; plays were primarily a waste of the honest Christian’s time and money.¹⁹

One reason why neoclassicism became so quickly and thoroughly dominant in European theater during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was that its arguments, based on strict Aristotelian standards of concision (unity), propriety, and decorum, were the chief weapons used to defend secular theater against accusations of immorality. Neoclassical plays were two to three hours long. Yet even in the countries where Aristotle’s influence was weakest, Spain and England, the general expectation that a performance would last two to three hours prevailed. Most of Lope de Vega’s 300-odd surviving *comedias* (the three-act Spanish form) are within this range, and in his sole theoretical text on playwriting, “The New Art of Writing

Plays” (1609), he cites audience “patience” as the main justification for his length prescription:

Four pages for each act should be your aim,
For twelve best suit the patience and also
The time of those who come to see the show.²⁰

At Shakespeare’s Globe Theater, performances began at 2:00 p.m. and ended around 5:00 p.m., with music beforehand and a jig afterward so that “the two hours’ traffic of our stage” mentioned in the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* is generally considered a good approximation of average play length. Obviously, the published texts of some plays are much longer than that on stage—the Folio text of *Hamlet*, for instance, takes nearly five hours to perform—but scholarly editors tell us that only trimmed versions could have been performed in the public theaters, where daylight quickly faded in the late London afternoons.²¹

Since the time of Lope and Shakespeare, the norm of two to three hours has been one of the most durable conventions of the Western theater. Amazingly, it survived the advent of the bourgeois theater in the eighteenth century and the development of “leisure” as a respected sphere of fulfillment separate from “work.” It survived the insatiable thirst for mass popular entertainment and the march of ever more spectacular stage effects in the nineteenth century. And it generally survived the rise of egotistical directors in the twentieth century, though as a group they are its most consistent challenge today. There were numerous exceptions within this 400-year period—occasional, isolated cases of long productions in high and popular culture—but in my view only two developments have occurred that impinged significantly on the norm: Romantic closet drama and Wagner’s music drama.

Romantic closet drama refers to a small number of early nineteenth-century verse plays intended solely for reading and not for performance that have had outsize influence because they were written by world-class poets such as Goethe, Byron, and Shelley as declarations of imaginative liberation from the limitations of their age’s clumsy stagecraft. Because the ur-text of this tradition, Goethe’s *Faust, Part II*, was notoriously long, as were many of the later nineteenth-century works it inspired, such as Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, the genre is generally associated with unwieldy length. It is also typified by defiant impracticality: fantastic settings, impossible stage direc-

tions, uninhibited shifts of time and space, and blurred boundaries between interior and exterior experience, all of which were baffling to early readers.

Scattered admirers always existed, however, and a century later in the age of the avant-garde the genre's impracticality was widely hailed as a virtue and emulated by writers such as Paul Claudel and Karl Kraus in outrageously vast dramatic works such as *The Satin Slipper* and *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* (*The Last Days of Mankind*). Avant-garde directors from Wagner to Ligné-Poe to Meyerhold to Peter Stein also regarded such texts as challenges and prided themselves on their ability to stage what was ostensibly unstageable. Wagner was not a devotee of closet drama per se, as he despised its recourse to the reading chair and fulminated against the decadent state of a theater that forced its best poets to take refuge in "abstract literary impotence."²² He nevertheless dreamed of founding a theater dedicated to *Faust* and had this to say in 1872 about its not-yet-staged second part:

Before us Germans lies an . . . uncomprehended artwork, a riddle still unsolved, in Goethe's *Faust*. It is . . . for the present . . . theatrically-speaking impracticable, for the simple reason that the German Stage itself has shamefully made away the originality of its own development. Only when this shall have been recovered, when we possess a Theatre, a stage and actors who can set this Germanest of all dramas completely properly before us, will our aesthetic Criticism also be able to rightly judge this work: whereas to-day the coryphoei of that Criticism presume to crack bad jokes and parodies upon its second part. We then shall perceive that no stage piece in the world has such a scenic force and directness.²³

Peter Stein very clearly set out to establish this theater in 2000, undaunted by the famous line about shortness of time quoted in the epigraph to this introduction. The context of that line is this: Faust issues an impassioned Wagnerian demand to "sound the heights and depths that men can know" and "load my bosom," godlike, "with their weal and woe." Mephistopheles, knowing he can never grant such a wish, waggishly cautions: "Time is short, art is long."²⁴

Wagner's own music dramas pertain to this discussion both because of their length and because they constitute the most elaborate effort yet made in the modern theater to re-create the experience of communal unity and tribal reckoning of ancient Greek tragedy. Wagner sought to assuage the spiritual hungers of what he saw as a deracinated, commercial-minded, industrial-age public by appealing to them through myth, which he thought

would tap their higher instincts and bind them more strongly together as a “folk.” He also hoped his epic-scale theatrical productions would heal the split between the separate arts (poetry, painting, dance, and music) that supposedly occurred with the downfall of the Athenian state. The noxious nationalistic and totalitarian overtones of that theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) have been widely observed, and I touch on them later in this book. We do well to remember, however, that the inchoate spiritual hungers that Wagner perceived were real, and endure in our scarcely less de-racinated world—which is why mythic and epic-scale appeals in the theater persist in our day, and why the festival that Wagner founded in Bayreuth (which grew into a cult event under his widow Cosima) became the prototype for countless other arts festivals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that similarly aimed to raise the stakes for Culture beyond diversion for the tired businessman.

As I considered the reasons why marathon theater events have flourished in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the first that came to mind was the proliferation of arts festivals. During the post–World War II period in Europe and America, innumerable deindustrialized cities inaugurated summer festivals to rebrand themselves and encourage tourism. Most also had the somewhat loftier goals of reclaiming a civilizing function for the arts (which had been discredited by the war) and intensifying the public’s involvement in theater by separating it from workaday routines and immersing it in experiences it was not aware it craved—such as performances set in offbeat locations, performances bent on recovering some of the communal camaraderie of the Mystery tradition, and performances lasting longer than the usual norm. Lengthy theater by famous directors grabbed headlines and attracted thousands of outsiders to the festival host cities for multiday visits. *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) began at the Avignon Festival, as did *The Mahabharata* (1985), and few years have gone by at Avignon, Salzburg, Spoleto, Edinburgh, or the Lincoln Center and BAM Next Wave Festivals since the 1980s without some lengthy work by Wilson, Brook, Mnouchkine, Lepage, Giorgio Strehler, Olivier Py, Frank Castorf, or another marathon specialist topping the bill.

The international stardom of such directors also helps to explain why marathon theater has flourished in recent decades. In their early years, the postwar theater festivals competed for star actors, but beginning in the 1960s and 1970s directors were the sought-after “stars,” at least in continental Europe. This was due to the new ethos of director’s theater, whose heroes

commanded great prestige and critical attention, which won them the power and financial backing to realize enormous projects to which their predecessors could not have aspired. Marathon theater does not necessarily require star directors and lavishly subsidized institutions. *Nicholas Nickleby* (1980) and *The Mysteries* (Bill Bryden and Tony Harrison's 1985 ten-hour cycle-play adaptation in London) were ensemble-creations by frugally subsidized British institutions. John Barton, a talented adaptor and former Cambridge don who never acquired directorial stardom, has mounted three high-profile theatrical marathons, two with the RSC and one at the Denver Theater Center: *The Wars of the Roses* (a 1964 compilation of Shakespeare's history plays), *The Greeks* (a 1980 compilation of ancient texts about the House of Atreus), and *Tantalus* (a 2000 compilation of Greek plays about the Trojan War). *Angels in America* (San Francisco 1991, Broadway 1993), and *The Kentucky Cycle* (Seattle 1991, Broadway 1993) were both playwright-driven projects developed at American regional theaters.

What binds all this exceedingly diverse work together is the opportunity it has provided for thinking theatergoers in the media age to resist the maddening, ubiquitous, and nearly irresistible pressure to reduce, abbreviate, and trivialize. Ours is an era of notoriously minuscule attention spans, when time has generally become more valuable than money for the social class that attends high-profile theater, yet that class needs occasional relief from image-swarm, from the split screens, quick cuts, bullet lists, and call-waiting that keep it caffeinated. It is no coincidence that long productions tend to occur in the summer, as their slowed-down experience of time replicates benefits that many people seek in vacations, such as traveling with other people to share common experiences with them, or watching long baseball games, or relishing elongated days to commune with nature, or to read long novels.

The latter activity is most comparable to marathon theater.²⁵ As is often observed, the demands of doorstep novels (such as *Nicholas Nickleby* or Dostoyevsky's *The Demons*, which Peter Stein adapted) do not fit the rush-rush postmodern lifestyle, but their authors still sell thousands of copies, indicating that many people have the impulse to immerse themselves, even if they ultimately fail in the act. So much around us is *perforce* distilled and fragmented that we long for the fullness of comprehensively conceived worlds, long to lose ourselves in elaborate and epic story arcs, savor panoramic vistas, and ponder quixotic concepts of the monumental. We would do all this as readers if we had time, or if we could concentrate, or

stay awake, but the truth is it is easier for us to do it watching theater. Or watching film or television for that matter, since excellent long-format works—usually shown in sections over multiple days—have also proliferated in those media during the same period in response to the same social need (e.g., marathon films by the likes of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, and Jacques Rivette, and serious, filmlike television serials such as *Lost*, *The Sopranos*, and *Mad Men* that extend plot complications over eight hours of viewing time or longer).

The key difference between watching very long works on media and watching them in the theater is in the nature of the communal experience. Because theater confronts us with the physical, real-time presence of toiling performers as well as fellow audience members, it provokes a greater awareness of the body—and of the ticking clock of mortality—than recorded performances can. To that extent, marathon theater is more akin to endurance performance art than to lengthy film, since endurance performers such as Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, and Tehching Hsieh, who spend days, weeks, or years performing selected activities (such as living for a week on a shelf in an art gallery, or walking half the length of the Great Wall of China, or living outdoors in New York City for a year without ever entering a dwelling), are all deeply and riskily concerned with the experience of the body in time and space.

The palpable exertions of living performers striving to breathe life into dramatic artworks for our sake, replenishing our energy with theirs as we watch them, is theater's signature feature, and numerous major theater figures (such as Yeats, Beckett, Grotowski, Kantor, Chaikin, and Peter Stein) have pointed out the connection between that physical presence and an awareness of the omnipresence of death. Yeats on Noh theater, a form pervaded with ghosts: "We only believe in those thoughts which have been conceived not in the brain but in the whole body."²⁶ The inherent gravity within theater's basic physical circumstance—even in comedy, even in circus—helps explain why theater audiences in general are less mentally passive than their film and TV counterparts.

I have twice attended public screenings of Syberberg's masterful seven-hour *Hitler: Ein Film aus Deutschland* (*Our Hitler: A Film from Germany*, 1977)—a film that is as imbued with hovering death as any tragedy and has a distinct *jo-ha-kyu* rhythm to it. Yet not once during those days did I feel my bodily exhaustion transforming into exhilaration as it often did during my days with *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Einstein on the Beach*, *Angels in America*,

and *Faust I + II*. Nor were the cinema spectators particularly sociable during the screening breaks. The essential difference lay in the cinema audience's inherent passivity (lacking engagement with the energy of living performers) and its inclination to hypnotic immersion (especially strong with Syberberg's dazzling phantasmagoria). In 2007, when the restored version of Fassbinder's fifteen-and-a-half-hour film *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980) was released in Germany, it played for two months at the Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, which addressed the problem of unwieldy length by arranging for each of the film's fourteen episodes to be shown continuously in a separate private viewing cabinet: marathon film as the apotheosis of the peep show!

This book is not about monumental peep shows, or about unwieldy length regarded in any sense as a practical problem to be solved, a clever PR strategy, or an edifying ordeal (as Peter Weiss envisioned his lengthy documentary drama about the Auschwitz trials, *Die Ermittlung* [*The Investigation*]: "part of the play's essential quality is its enormous length—it is unbearable. It should be unbearable").²⁷ This book is about theatrical works that boldly imagine how we screen-obsessed secularists might reconceive the monumental, and how we might actually achieve some fleeting moments of public communion akin to the experiences of our forebears at the Corpus Christi and City Dionysia festivals.

“Marathon,” “Event,” and Scandal

I beg indulgence now for a brief digression, to explain my reasons for making peace with the puffy word “marathon.” The more I looked into the background of this word, the more I was inclined to forgive it for constantly trying to sell me things, and I have come to see it as the perfect descriptor for the long contemporary productions under discussion.

First, a few facts. It turns out that the figurative use of “marathon” is exclusively modern (the earliest OED reference is from 1909: “a coaching marathon”). It was not employed to describe any of the megadramas of the nineteenth century or earlier, because the long-distance footrace we now know by this name dates only from the revival of the Olympic games at Athens in 1896. Long-distance running was considered an odd activity in the nineteenth century, yet the first modern Olympic sponsors added a twenty-six-mile run over the road from the coastal town of Marathon to Athens as a publicity stunt. They believed it would add classical luster to the

revived games by commemorating a legendary Greek athletic feat: in 490 B.C., a zealous messenger ran from Marathon to Athens to report the Athenian military victory over the Persians, and then (according to Robert Browning in an 1878 poem that inspired the Olympic revivalists) dropped dead after delivering his message.²⁸

What is most interesting about this legendary and historical background is that the layers of aggrandizement and sensationalism in it survive as overtones in our modern use of the word. No less for theater than for running, sit-ins and love-ins, telethons, Senate filibusters, speeches by Fidel Castro, all-night readings of *Ulysses* on Bloomsday, or any other prolonged activity, “marathon” suggests a crass spectacle of masochism and hucksterism, possibly a stunt, but also a monument of genuine and respectable achievement and a feat of endurance. Today, it has evolved into a term of praise and enlargement that is useful precisely because it is mildly tongue-in-cheek and falls just short of hype. “Marathon” signals something the listener knows is deceptively packaged but nevertheless suspects is impressively excessive, and hence real, underneath. In that way it shares ambiguities with the words “theatrical” and “dramatic,” which can also lean toward either the spurious or the authentic. All this means that from a certain point of view, the phrase “marathon theater” is slightly redundant, suggesting an experience of ultratheatrical theater because it implies essentialized quality as well as greater quantity.

Peter Stein’s advertisements for his “Marathon *Faust*” at the giant world’s fair Expo 2000, for instance, were meant to convey that the production represented the essence of theater at the turn of the millennium. A similar compliment was intended by the *New York Times* journalist who wrote in 1970 that “a marathon performance of Shakespeare” had “enthralled 3,000 spectators in Central Park.”²⁹ The protagonist of the 1976 movie thriller *Marathon Man*, played by Dustin Hoffman, was not a professional runner but a Ph.D. student and would-be marathoner who succeeded in foiling a complex conspiracy involving Nazi war criminals; the film used “marathon” as a trope for depth of thought.

“Marathon” developed these connotations over decades but became a staple of theater journalism and publicity only in the 1970s. It appeared very rarely in reviews of earlier lengthy theater, such as the 1928 and 1963 Broadway productions of the five-hour *Strange Interlude* (it was ubiquitous in the coverage of that play’s third Broadway run in 1985). The running boom of the 1970s in the United States made the word a vernacular commonplace,

and when *Nicholas Nickleby* came to Broadway in 1981, nearly every review employed the word even though one of that show's Broadway producers (Nelle Nugent) told me that she and her colleagues had avoided it in announcements for fear of sending the wrong "negative" message for an "unabashedly commercial" project they were promoting as "pure entertainment."³⁰ The Broadway *Nickleby* was a watershed for another reason as well: it was the first time a theater production was "event-marketed" in the relatively new mass media tradition of *Star Wars*, the Super Bowl, and *Roots* (a TV miniseries). Media "events"—building on the precedent of earlier proto-blockbusters like *Gone with the Wind*—had been warmly embraced as a boon to American culture because they utilized mass advertising to make millions of atomized consumers feel gathered into a community.

Interestingly enough, though, that is not the point Nugent stressed in her interview. She put the matter this way: "You either were there or you were nowhere—that's basically what we created in the marketing of it. You saw *Nicholas Nickleby* and you were the cognoscenti or you were not." This commercial producer, that is to say, thought not just of uniting ordinary people into a community but of cultivating a "cognoscenti" whose self-respect depended on knowing about the show. She and her coproducers were well aware that there was much more to *Nickleby* than "pure entertainment," and they seized the opportunity it offered to establish a subcategory of "event" in the arena of theater for people able to appreciate such a project as an interesting hybrid of the high and low. That is the historical door that *Nickleby* opened: it established theater marathons, in the United States and Europe, as a viable new form of quasi-popular entertainment made by highbrow artists grasping for mass popularity (Brook, Wilson, Stein) that would be devoured by a privileged postmodern elite hungry for new "crossover" masterpieces and flattered at the thought that it was defying the age-old bourgeois posture of comfortably packaged artistic consumption.

Nickleby began another trend as well—one that added a layer of fascination to many of the marathon productions that followed it in both commercial and noncommercial arenas. The productions turned out to be scandal magnets. For several decades in the United States (and to a lesser extent elsewhere), each prominent new one seemed to spark a fresh cultural-political controversy peripheral to its subject matter. Much of this was opportunism; the publicity the shows attracted was like a standing invitation to political party-crashers, allowing many discussions that would otherwise have been marginal to take place on wide public stages. To me,

though, the discussions were truly important and deserved the attention; I take up many of them in my essays.

In the case of *Nickleby*, the controversy concerned the Shubert Organization's decision to use a melodramatic story about helping the needy as a vehicle to breach the \$100 Broadway ticket-price barrier for the first time. With *The Mahabharata*, it was about Brook's touristic approach to Indian culture, which some regarded as colonialist exploitation, and about the appropriateness of using \$4.2 million of New York City money to renovate a publicly owned theater as a chic ruin to suit Brook's taste. Robert Wilson's *the CIVIL warS* created a scandal without ever being performed in its entirety: this twelve-hour production, created piecemeal in six countries, was canceled by the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics Arts Festival at the last minute due to lack of financial backing, sparking international condemnation of American philistinism. *Angels in America* provoked multiple homophobic attacks in the mid-1990s for its unapologetic depiction of homosexuals as normal and fully enfranchised American citizens, and Robert Schenkkan's *The Kentucky Cycle* provoked multiple regional attacks in 1993 for ostensibly stigmatizing Appalachians as rapacious and violent. Robert Lepage's marathon intercultural pieces, *La trilogie des dragons* (*The Trilogy of Dragons*, 1987) and *The Seven Streams of the River Ota* (1995), were similarly attacked for perceived insensitivity in their Chinese and Japanese characterizations. None of these scandals would have received as much press coverage as they did if editors had not first deemed the productions newsworthy due to their unusual length.

For two reasons, this trend has almost certainly now run its course. First, public outrage has grown more and more short-lived in the media age, notwithstanding the tireless efforts of activist-artists to foment it. In 2003, for instance, Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil tried to raise consciousness and anger with a beautiful and engrossing seven-hour production about war refugees called *Le dernier caravansérail* (*Odysées*) [*The Last Caravansary* (*Odyssey*)]. Most journalistic responses to that show, though, expressed polite acknowledgment of the company's good works and then moved on to effusive praise of the piece's theatrical artistry. Another key factor is that marathon theater has become so common that it is no longer automatically major news. During 2010, the following productions (some performed over multiple days) all appeared in New York City: Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz* (a seven-hour performance of *The Great Gatsby*); Peter Stein's twelve-hour adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *The Demons*; Taylor

Mac's five-hour downtown extravaganza *The Lily's Revenge*; Horton Foote's nine-play *The Orphan Cycle*; Tarell Alvin McGraney's trilogy *The Brother/Sister Plays*; Lepage's nine-hour *Lipsynch*; Tricycle Theater's twelve-play chronicle *The Great Game: Afghanistan*; and the first New York revival of *Angels in America*. All this in the same year as a much-discussed performance at the Museum of Modern Art called "The Artist is Present," in which Marina Abramovic sat meditatively in a chair during all of the museum's open hours for two and half months (a total of 700 hours), while visitors waited in line each day for a chance to sit opposite her. The true PR coup in such a glutted environment was to be noticed, not singled out as outrageous.

The works examined in *Great Lengths* are among the pinnacles of my theatergoing over almost thirty years. Each of these productions played a major role in maintaining my interest in this much-beleaguered art during that period. The book, as should already be apparent, has a more personal tone than most works of criticism, and I hope this will not be too distracting for readers. In any event, it was unavoidable, because I am not merely reporting here on a collection of plays I happened to see but rather describing experiences of extremely unusual intensity and significance in the theater. This intensity was obviously unexpected at first, but after I began to understand it, it became an object of pilgrimage, and I reached my critical perceptions about these productions too much through personal reaction to keep that element out of my analyses. The works in question in no small measure justified the continued existence of theater to me. More than that, they offered me a glimpse of why the art was invented in the first place, because their long duration folded time into their form and purpose in ways that shed remarkably clear light on the core connections between theatrical enactment and existence itself.

It may be that marathon productions have become common of late. The good ones are still rare, exhilarating, and in every case freshly surprising, because they represent theater that is *necessary*—by which I mean theater that is not merely clever, edifying, or entertaining but inspiringly ambitious, that gathers people together in ways they scarcely thought possible, confirming their common humanity, and reminds them of what the art once looked and felt like when it mattered much, much more to the average person than it does today. The true "cost of a thing," wrote Henry David Thoreau, "is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it."³¹ And the true value of a thing is the amount of life we are willing to exchange for it.