

1949 *The Idea of a Theater:
A Study of Ten Plays*

Francis Fergusson

Former U.S. poet laureate Robert Pinsky has called Francis Fergusson “one of the few truly great American critics of the [twentieth] century.” A renowned classical scholar, translator, and critic, Fergusson had the rare critical gift of being able to combine a sense of the past with penetrating contemporary insight. In the 1920s Fergusson had theatrical training and worked as an assistant to Richard Boleslavsky, the Russian actor and teacher who introduced Americans to the Stanislavskian method of acting. Fergusson began his teaching career at Bennington College—where Martha Graham was his colleague.

All these experiences influenced his enduring study *The Idea of a Theater*, in which Fergusson developed an original approach to the phenomenon of theater. He looked closely at just ten plays—from Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* to T. S. Eliot’s then-contemporary *Murder in the Cathedral* (1938)—in order to develop a historical continuum that captured the changing perspective of dramatic art. He saw in theater what many literary critics could not: that drama cannot be reduced to the literary. Applying concepts from classical anthropology, he linked the study of ritual to the study of drama. His perspective exercised great influence over later scholarship on the theater, especially in Shakespeare studies. The book was and continues to be an excellent theoretical and analytical guide to understanding dramatic form and dramatic ideas.

