

Shakespeare's Theatre

Theatre architecture

The first permanent English playhouse, called The Theatre, was built by James Burbage in Shoreditch in 1576. The Curtain, the Rose, the Swan, the Fortune and the Globe were names of other important Elizabethan playhouses which followed. Theatre-going was frowned upon in the City of London so theatres were built in the suburbs, notably Southwark where the Globe was located. Shakespeare was first associated with The Theatre and later with the Curtain and the Globe.

Elizabethan theatre design may have taken its inspiration from bear-baiting or cock-fighting arenas as well as the innyards where troupes of travelling players had been performing for some time. The new permanent theatres were round or polygonal, the Globe having perhaps 20 sides. They usually had three galleried levels for seated audiences and a thrust stage extending into an open courtyard. The playgoers with cheaper tickets stood in the 'pit' surrounding the stage. The area at the back of the thrust stage provided important playing areas: two or three doors flanking a curtained recess, a balcony for such scenes as Romeo's visit to Juliet and Marc Antony's death, and probably a third level where musicians and special effects could be accommodated. One special effect destroyed the first Globe: in 1613 a cannonball from a performance of *Henry VIII* set fire to the theatre's thatched roof. The second Globe was built on the same site the following year.



The Swan Theatre is based on Elizabethan theatre design

These 'public' theatres, so-called because they were designed for the general public, were very large. The Globe seated as many as 3000, three times the number that the RSC main stage or the National's Olivier Theatre can accommodate.

During the reign of the James I, indoor 'private' theatres began to be used by the major acting troupes. Shakespeare was associated with the Blackfriars Playhouse where his company played during the winter months. These more exclusive indoor theatres accommodated a few hundred playgoers, were lit with candles and seated the entire audience. The price of a ticket was perhaps six times that of the public theatres.

Theatre companies

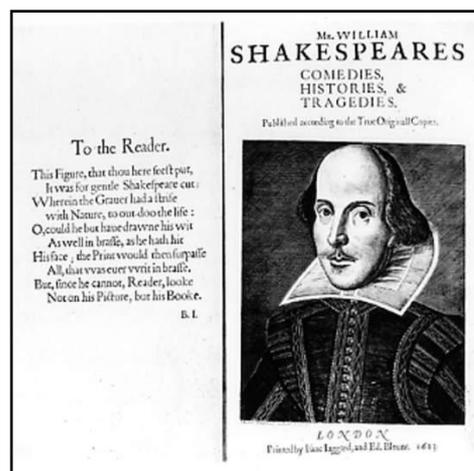
While City of London officials regarded theatre-going as a noisy, disruptive activity, Queen Elizabeth I enjoyed this art form and her approval paved the way for noble patronage of enterprising groups of actors.

By 1593 two major acting companies had emerged as dominant in London. The Lord Admiral's Men were led by actor Edward Alleyn who played Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, *Faustus*, and *The Jew of Malta*. The Lord Chamberlain's Men, later the King's Men, was led by James and Richard Burbage. Both companies operated shareholder systems. Shakespeare was one of six or seven shareholders in his company and therefore had a major role in its management.

Shareholders' responsibilities included:

- Choosing the plays
- Overseeing finances
- Organising schedules in London and for tours
- Selecting and casting the actors
- Managing rehearsals and performances.

In both the main companies shareholders played to their strengths. Although Shakespeare did act, his primary responsibility was for writing plays. Hamlet, Lear, Othello and Macbeth were played by Richard Burbage, the leading actor of his age. Adam in *As You Like It* and the Ghost in *Hamlet* are among the roles Shakespeare may have played.



First Folio dedication and title page, published in 1623

Stage and theatre practice

'Can this cockpit hold the vasty fields of France?' asks the Chorus in *Henry V*. The comparatively bare Elizabethan stage called on its audience to use their imaginations. A surviving props inventory lists among other items:

- 'Neptune's fork and garland'
- 'Two moss banks and one snake'
- 'One rock, one cage, one tomb, one hell mouth' ¹



This print illustrates the dress actors would wear to perform Shakespeare's plays. Image shows 'Courtship' from *Roxburghe Ballads* (Hereford, 1864), II, 509

The emphasis was on special effects and props, with few large set pieces. This strategy allowed for rapid scene changes as required by the drama of the time. Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* has 42 scenes spanning most of the civilised world. Costumes were usually contemporary dress, often very lavish, with little attempt at historical accuracy.

At the public theatres plays were performed at two o'clock in the afternoon. If the weather was acceptable a flag was hoisted to signal that a performance would take place that day. Until the companies were able to use the indoor theatres after 1610, during the winter they would perform at court and tour the provinces.

Not uncommonly the plague closed the theatres altogether for months at a time. Acting was a precarious occupation.

Theatre was a popular but competitive business. To attract audiences the companies operated a repertory system, performing as many as six different plays a week. Rehearsals were necessarily brief, just a few hours in the morning, and the leading actors carried many thousands of lines in their heads.

Women were forbidden from working in the theatre so female roles were played by boys whose voices had not yet broken. Actors often played the same kind of character most of the time: fools, country yokels, young lovers and leading men were standard 'lines of business'.

¹ From Philip Henslowe's diary, available online at <http://www.archive.org/details/henslowesdiary01hensuoft>

Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences

In Shakespeare's time London was the fastest growing city in the world. It was a bustling, noisy, dirty, dangerous, exciting place to be. For entertainment, the theatre competed with bear- and bull-baiting, taverns, brothels, gambling and cockfighting.

People from all social classes attended the public theatres. The lower classes stood in the 'pit' near the stage while the middle classes sat in the galleries. There were special boxes for the titled and wealthy. Admission varied from one to three pennies. Vendors moved through the audience selling wine, beer, fruit, tobacco and playbooks. Performances could be three hours long so audiences were often rowdy. Actors needed energy, presence and strong voices to hold their own in such a setting. The atmosphere of the indoor theatres was more sedate.

In 1642 the Puritans closed all the theatres and two years later demolished the second Globe, marking the end of an extraordinary period in theatre history.

Further reading

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

This website offers detailed information about Shakespeare's theatre, illustrated by some images from their extensive archives:

http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10&Itemid=10

Folger Shakespeare Library

This facility in the USA holds a wide range of Shakespeare archives and resources, with plenty information about Shakespeare's theatre - London theatres, the buildings, staging his plays:

<http://www.folger.edu/Content/Discover-Shakespeare/Shakespeares-Theater/>

The Willow Cabin

This site was created by an American actor/academic and offers information about Shakespeare's theatre illustrated with some large images:

<http://www.willowcabin.com/theatre.htm>

Cambridge University Press

This page details Elizabethan theatre-going, in the context of learning about Shakespeare:

<http://www.fathom.com/course/28701903/session3.html>

theatrehistory.com

This page offers a detailed description of Elizabethan playhouses, actors and audiences:

<http://www.theatrehistory.com/british/bellinger001.html>

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