

THEATRE

In this chapter you will learn specific details about Elizabethan theatre. You will learn how popular theatre was but also how unpopular it was among some people. You will learn about the different types of theatres, about the actors, the performance conditions and the different types of audiences.

Elizabethan Theatre

Theatre and the Elizabethans

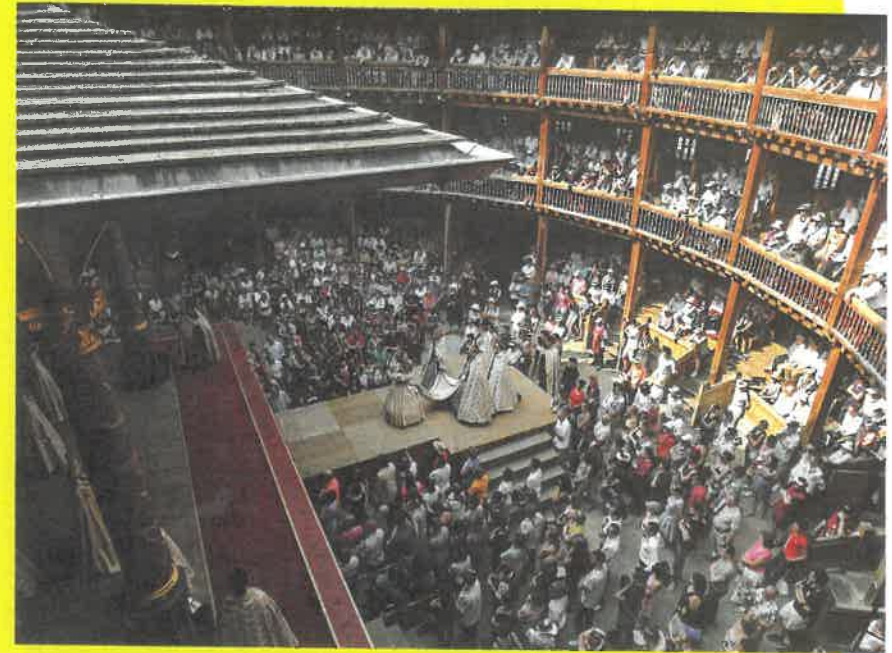
The theatre was probably the most popular form of entertainment for Elizabethans. Almost everybody from the highest to the lowest in society went to the theatre once in a while and there was an enormous demand for new plays. This means that there were many playwrights during the Elizabethan Era. Shakespeare may have been one of the best – and is certainly the most famous today, but he was not alone.

The social composition of London was very varied. We know that the Earl of Salisbury earned 50,000 pounds a year when he was Lord Treasurer from 1608-12. We also know that a shoemaker earned 3 pounds annually in comparison, and this does not even take into account the poor and unskilled labourers. This means that Shakespeare and his colleagues wrote their plays for an **extremely varied audience**. They wrote for rich and poor, educated and uneducated. They wrote for people of all social levels – and they had to include a little bit of something for everybody.

In the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) we see how Queen Elizabeth pays The Globe a visit. This would never have happened in real life. The Queen did love the theatre, but watched performances at court.

In England, theatre was a relatively new invention in the Elizabethan Era and the plays of the age were developed to suit the tastes of the Elizabethan audience. They were interested in the classics of literature, classical myth, etc., and they liked **complex stories with psychologically interesting characters and poetic language**. If you look at Shakespeare's plays, they have just that. Shakespeare was also very conscious of incorporating **bawdy jokes, slapstick humour and violent fights**. This was aimed at the lower classes, who loved this sort of thing passionately.

The theatres had scheduled performances 6 days a week at 2 or 3 pm – in daylight. They would perform **5-6 different plays a week** in respect of the audience who went several times a month, and this is perhaps the reason for the **great number of Elizabethan plays**. There was simply an enormous demand for new material because the audience was very large and visited often. Due to demands from the Puritans, plays were not performed on Sundays, during Lent and during plague epidemics.



Staging of *Henry VIII* at the Globe in 2010.

We do not know exactly how many plays and poems Shakespeare wrote. We do know, however, that he wrote at least 38 plays, 154 sonnets and a number of poems. The plays have traditionally been divided into three genres: tragedies, comedies and history plays. Some scholars have further subdivided the plays into a number of subgenres, e.g. romantic comedies. A couple of plays do not fit neatly into any of the above categories. Consequently, these plays have been labelled "problem plays". If we look at the three main categories, Shakespeare's tragedies include *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet*. His comedies include *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado about Nothing*. Examples of history plays are *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*. However, many of the tragedies dealt with historical characters, too. As the names indicate, Shakespeare's history plays (or simply histories) have famous historical characters and events as their subject matter.

The Theatre Buildings and Performance Conditions

There were two types of theatre: indoor playhouses and outdoor playhouses. The indoor playhouses were for a seated audience, whereas the outdoor theatres, like Shakespeare's Globe, were partly seated, partly standing.

We don't know exactly what Shakespeare's Globe looked like, but contemporary drawings of other theatres and other historical sources form the basis of the modern reconstruction of Shakespeare's the Globe. The modern Globe was built on the southern bank of the Thames in 1997. It is very close to the site of the original Globe from 1599. We assume that outdoor theatre buildings in the Elizabethan Era looked like this.

The building was an octagonal, rounded structure with the audience (the so-called "groundlings") on the uncovered ground in front of and on all sides of the stage, except directly behind the stage. You could pay one penny to be a groundling, one penny more to be under the roof, one penny more to get a seat, and one penny more to get a cushion. The Globe could house 2000-3000 people and it would be quite crowded. The crowd would be rather lively and participate in the play by shouting at the players, booing the villains and cheering during the fighting scenes. The groundlings were particularly lively and very close to the action. We know from several sources that they shouted at the actors if they had already seen the play that was being performed or they did not like it. We also know that the actors sometimes responded to this by changing plays to suit the audience.

Theatre in Elizabethan London was for everybody. The poor and the lower classes could get in for a penny – and were hence referred to as penny-stinkers, stinkards or groundlings. The term groundling was probably used because they stood on the ground, gaping at the players with their mouths open – looking like fish, or grundels. The groundlings participated in the plays by shouting and throwing things at the players, and they stood in a very crowded area; somewhat like the pit at a modern concert.

Look at the illustrations of the theatre and see if you can guess where the richest members of the audience would sit. Find the answer on p. 21.

The stage in Shakespeare's Globe consisted of an outer stage, an inner stage, an upper stage and two actors' entrances.

The outer stage was the main stage where most of the action took place. The inner stage was a room behind the outer stage which could be used for a tomb, for a character who was hiding, etc. The upper stage was a balcony where musicians were placed. It could be used as part of the stage, however.



It was probably used for Juliet's balcony in *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance. There was a trapdoor in the outer stage floor which led to a room beneath the stage from which ghosts, etc. could emerge. This room was known as "hell". Directly above the upper stage was a special effects room which contained items used during the play to create sound effects: a cannon and fireworks to create sounds of war, sheet metal to create the sound of thunder, etc. An actor could also be suspended from the ceiling above the outer stage, if necessary.

Theatre during the Elizabethan age was **not very naturalistic**, apart from the acting style. There was no curtain and **no scenery**. The actors used a lot of props, like pig's blood, swords, crowns, cut-off limbs, etc., but the costumes were Elizabethan dresses and not historically correct costumes. There was no backdrop or scenery to give the audience a sense of setting – the actors' lines told people where and when the play was taking place.

For the performance of plays set in Rome, the actors would wear togas and Roman dresses. For all other plays, they would wear elaborate, beautiful and expensive Elizabethan costumes. For the setting, the audience had to use their imaginations because there was no scenery. The plays were performed in broad daylight, but the action sometimes took place at night. They were performed in London, but often took place in foreign locations or ancient times. Without scenery, the Elizabethan plays created the setting with words, letting the characters give us information about the places they were in. When *Hamlet* opens, for instance, we quickly sense that the two characters on stage cannot see each other because it is dark. The guard Bernardo sends the other guard to bed with the words "Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed, Francisco," and Francisco answers that he is glad to be relieved because "'tis bitter cold". Within a few lines we have also learned that we are in Denmark. No scenery, but a cold winter midnight in Denmark. This is **setting created through words**.

Left: The Globe was reconstructed in 1997 in almost the exact same place in London that the original theatre was situated.

Right: The stage in Shakespeare's the Globe consisted of an outer stage, an inner stage, an upper stage and two actors' entrances.

The Actors

Being an actor during the Elizabethan Era was not easy. The Puritans did everything they could to abolish the theatre which thrived outside the city walls. In 1572 they even introduced a law stating that actors without financial support from a nobleman were to be regarded as vagabonds and "subject to be grievously whipped and burned through the gristle of the right ear with a hot iron". So being an actor was illegal unless somebody important put their name to your group of actors. Luckily for the actors, however, many noblemen were only too happy to support an acting troupe because they loved to be entertained. Shakespeare was therefore protected as he was a member of a group called "The King's Men" – they had financial support and noble support, so they were not vagabonds. The troupe had been known as The Lord Chamberlain's Men until 1603, when Queen Elizabeth died and was succeeded by King James.

Furthermore, there were no female actors during the Elizabethan Era. It was simply unthinkable. This meant that all the roles at Shakespeare's time were played by men. Some of these male actors, Richard Burbage and William Kempe for instance, were among the star actors of their time. They were much loved and respected by their audiences. The young women, such as Juliet, were played by boys whose voices had not yet broken.

From the actors' point of view: In a modern theatre, the audience is sitting in darkness. This allows us to pretend that the actors cannot see us, and we can believe we are secretly watching somebody else's private moments. This is often referred to as the "4th wall" – a non-existent wall between the actors and the audience. We can see through that wall, but they cannot see us watching. For an actor it is a very different experience to act in daylight where you cannot really pretend to be hidden from the audience. Shakespeare's actors could always see the audience members, and the audience members were not afraid of raising their voices by applauding the heroes, booing the villains and expressing their discontent or satisfaction with what was going on on stage. This created a special atmosphere with lots of interaction, such as speaking directly to audience members.

The Elizabethan Audience

As stated, the audience at Shakespeare's time was extremely socially varied, but what makes them truly different from a modern theatre audience was the fact that they participated loudly in the performances. Nobody shouts at the actors during a modern play, but Shakespeare's audience often behaved like a modern crowd at a football match.

To underline just how varied Shakespeare's audience could be, think of how there are two words in English that mean almost the same thing: audience and spectator. The origin of these words is Latin and they show us that some people came for an audio experience: to listen to the poetry of the play, whereas others came to watch the spectacle: they came to see the clowns, fights, etc. Shakespeare had to satisfy both groups, but it was considered more refined to be an audience member than a spectator. Therefore the most expensive seats were actually the "worst" seats in the house where you could hardly see the stage, but people could see you. They could see you could afford these seats, and they could see that you were so refined you did not actually have to watch the play: you came to listen. The Elizabethan audience wore enormous hats. The richer you were, the larger your hat! If you were rich enough, you would be in the seats above and partly behind the stage, maybe seated behind a hat the size of a small house. However, Elizabethan theatres were in direct competition with diverse blood sports, like bullfighting. So there was almost always some form of physical acting, such as fights, clowning, etc. The spectators demanded this!

To understand what it was like in the theatre building, again, think of a festival or a rock concert. There was no break in the play, which went on for several hours, and you could buy food and drink in the crowd. If you had to go to the toilet during the performance, you either went to the nearby river or used the buckets in the corridors. Prostitutes serviced their customers during the performances and thieves relieved you of your money if you had too much to drink or were not cautious.