

Shakespeare: Social and Historical Context

Theatre

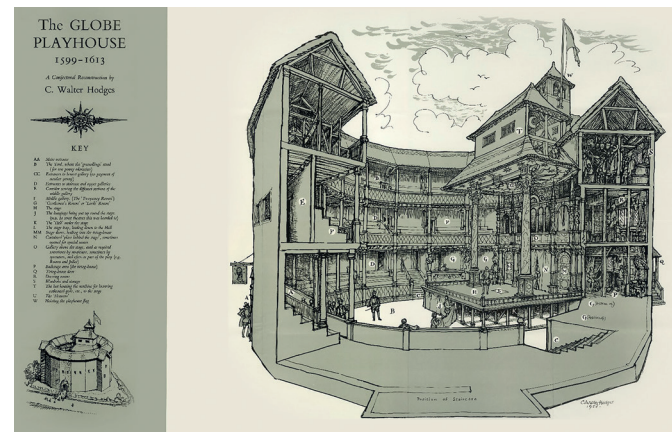
Going to the theatre was a popular pastime for people of all ages and backgrounds in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. With no television or cinema, the theatre was the place to get cutting-edge drama and entertainment.

Plays and drama had been popular in England for some time, and travelling groups of players would tour around the country, performing their productions. This may well be how Shakespeare had his first taste of theatre. However, it was in London, in 1576, that the first purpose-built theatre was opened. This created a surge in popularity for theatre, and many more playhouses opened over the next decades.

Although there were indoor theatres in Shakespeare's time, we often think of the outdoor theatres of his era when considering how his plays were performed. This is probably because Shakespeare himself built an outdoor theatre, known as the Globe, with a group of other actors known as The Chamberlain's Men.

Opened in 1597, the Globe was situated on the south bank of the Thames in London. This location was important; it was outside the boundaries of the City of London, and therefore could not be controlled by officials who were generally disapproving of theatres. (Theatre was not popular with everyone – The Puritans were a religious movement who managed to get theatre banned altogether in 1642.) The South Bank already had two other popular theatres: the Rose and the Swan.

Made of a combination of bricks and timber, the Globe could hold up to 3,000 people. It was a round building with a central yard which was open to the sky. Poorer theatre-goers stood in the yard to watch plays, and were known as 'groundlings'. Richer audience members could sit on wooden benches in galleries under the thatched roof which went around the outside of the yard. The richest of all could hire cushions for their seats.



Audience members ranged from poor servants to rich aristocracy. Food and drink were available, such as oranges, nuts and beer. The theatre-going experience was much rowdier than it is today – audiences would heckle or boo the villains and cheer their heroes. It was also not uncommon for fights to break out!

The stage was covered with a roof to keep the actors dry, known as 'the heavens', and had a 'tiring house', where the actors changed their costumes, behind it. Acting was not easy – there was a high turnover of plays as audiences were so large. Parts had to be learnt quickly, and actors were never given a whole copy of their play – just their part with their cue-lines written in. Acting was an exclusively male profession, as it was considered scandalous for women to appear on the stage. Therefore, parts such as Juliet from 'Romeo and Juliet' were played by young boys whose voices had not yet matured.

Costumes were often lavish and purchased second-hand from aristocracy. Special effects were expected by the audiences too. These included sound effects of storms and occasional lightning flashes. In a production of Henry VIII in 1613, an attempt at igniting a cannon ended up setting fire to the thatched roof of the Globe, with the result that the whole building burnt to the ground! Fortunately, the owners rebuilt it on the same site.