

The theatre of WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

BY JUSTIN EICK



Figure 1: The interior of the Globe Theatre in London

During the late 16th century, London witnessed a renaissance in the practice and presentation of theatre. Indeed, several significant developments contributed to the success and popularity of English theatre during this period.

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ACTING TROUPES

It is not without some irony that the appearance of professional acting companies in London during the late 1500s can actually be traced back to Queen Elizabeth's ban in 1558 on plays – specifically those dealing with politics or religion.

Her decree effectively ended the religious plays of the medieval period (known as the “mystery cycles”) which in turn paved the way for a new form of theatre to emerge.

Unfortunately, these new acting troupes faced two significant obstacles.

SEEKING PATRONAGE

The first was a public image problem – because theatrical performers did not belong to a guild or trade with an established “master/apprentice” framework, actors were viewed as “masterless” vagrants subject to prosecution under a 1572 statute against vagabonds and rogues.



Figure 2: Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I by George Gower - 1579

This same statute also required theatre companies to seek patronage from the nobility.

As such, acting troupes began to petition prominent nobleman for sponsorship. Theatre companies granted patronage received a small amount of financial backing from the nobleman to help partially cover the costs of production.

Far more important was the legal protection afforded theatre companies who managed to successfully secure patronage. With a nobleman now attached to their company, acting troupes could perform their plays without fear of prosecution.

In exchange for patronage, acting troupes named their company after their benefactor.

Thus, the Elizabethan period saw the rise of theatre companies with names like the Lord Admiral's Men and the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

FINDING FUNDING

While patronage allowed actors to legally present their plays, a second major hurdle remained – money.

Producing theatre is an expensive, resource-intensive endeavor. Plays require sets, costumes, props, scripts and of course, a venue.

The financial subsidy which accompanied patronage hardly covered all of the production costs and the absence of financial support from the church as a result of the ban on religious plays meant that theatre companies now faced a significant funding shortfall.

As a result, the theatre was forced to become a commercial venture, dependent upon a paying audience for survival.

This meant a shift in the very nature of theatre. Instead of

plays centered solely on religion, English dramatists sought to create entertaining productions with wide commercial appeal in the hopes that these new plays would prove profitable at the box office.

THE PLAYWRIGHTS

Freed from the constraints of solely writing religious plays for the church, playwrights began to explore a variety of different subjects – topics designed to keep audiences coming back again and again.



Figure 3: The exterior of the Globe Theatre in London

Full of passion, intrigue, suspense, farce and fantasy, these new productions encompassed multiple genres including comedies, tragedies, histories and everything in between.

Ever mindful of the throne, playwrights studiously avoided political or religious controversy.

To help ensure that these new plays didn't cross any lines which might be objectionable to the throne, Queen Elizabeth established a Master of Revels in 1574 who oversaw all theatrical production in London. Acting companies wishing to perform a play were required to obtain a license from the Master of Revels.

Because all productions needed approval from the Master of Revels, the plays were owned by the theatre companies, not the playwrights. A playwright with a good play could expect a theatre company to pay as much as £10 for the script.

Shifting to a commercial enterprise also required



Figure 4: Woodcut of Elizabethan actors

playwrights to produce a large number of plays in order to keep audiences returning on a regular basis. This meant new plays needed to be written and mounted at a spectacular pace.

In order to satisfy the demand for new material, most playwrights collaborated with other playwrights, presumably because multiple writers made the task of finishing a play easier. Shakespeare himself is thought to have collaborated on as many as 13 plays with other writers. Any proceeds from the sale of a script would have been split evenly among the writers.

THE ACTORS

The astonishing rate at which plays were written was matched only by the remarkable ability of the actors to rehearse and perform all of these plays.

With a different play being performed nearly every day of the week, it is widely believed that actors during this period were responsible for memorizing literally thousands and thousands of lines each year (not to mention all of the songs, dances and sword fights interspersed throughout the plays).



Figure 5: The interior of the Globe Theatre in London

Because the social and religious climate in England at the time prohibited women from appearing on-stage, all of the roles were performed entirely by men.

It should be noted that the ban on female actors was confined to Northern European countries – women regularly performed in French, Spanish and Italian

theatres.

Additionally, company members (of which there were approximately 25) were divided into three different categories: apprentices, hirelings and shareholders.

The position of apprentice was reserved for young boys seeking training and

advancement in the company.

These “actors-in-training” received invaluable experience working alongside the resident actors in the company.

More importantly, all of the female parts in the plays were performed by the apprentices – this practice of using young boys to play women explains

why so many of Shakespeare's plots revolve around women disguised as men (including *The Merchant Of Venice*, *12th Night*, *As You Like It*, *The Two Gentlemen Of Verona* and *Cymbeline*).

Hirelings were quite literally the "hired" help. These men performed most of the minor roles in the plays and served as stagehands, prop masters and costumers.

Paid weekly, these members also played music during the performances. Music featured heavily in Elizabethan drama with underscoring present in nearly every aspect of the show. Even the curtain call at the end of the show was typically accompanied by a dance set to music.

However, what both apprentices and hirelings truly aspired to be were shareholders in the company.

As part owners of the theatre company, shareholders took all of the main roles in the plays as well as a percentage of the profits.

In addition to being the primary playwright and a principal actor with the Lord Chamberlain's Men, William Shakespeare was also one of eight shareholders.

Shakespeare made the bulk of

his income from his stake in the company and as a result, was able to comfortably support his family – indeed, he purchased the second biggest home in Stratford in 1597 which he named New Place.



Figure 6: Woodcut of Elizabethan actors

A PERMANENT THEATRE

Another significant hallmark of English drama during the Renaissance involved the appearance of permanent playhouses.

As mentioned previously, Shakespeare was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men – a theatre company which received patronage from Henry Carey who held the Cabinet position of the Lord Chamberlain.

In the early years of the company, Lord Chamberlain's



Figure 7: The Globe Theatre

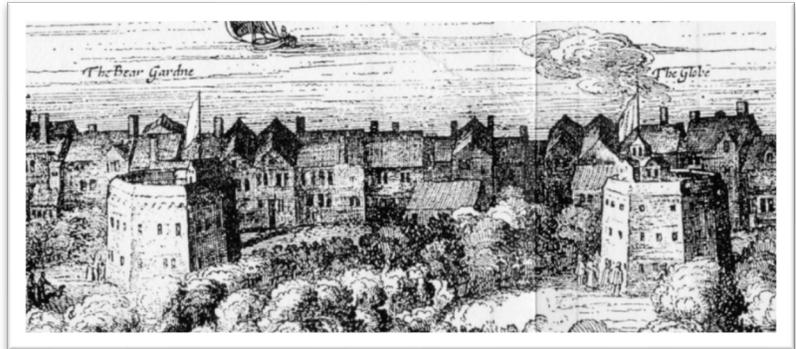


Figure 8: A drawing of Elizabethan playhouses

Men presented most of their productions at an Elizabethan playhouse known simply as "The Theatre" which they built on a leased plot of land just outside London.

Because of the plague, a statute was passed in 1575 which banned actors from the city of London – as such, all playhouses including "The Theatre", "The Curtain" and "The Rose" were built outside the city limits alongside brothels, prisons, insane asylums and bear-baiting arenas.

This last activity was as popular as it was depraved – essentially, spectators would gather to watch (and bet) on the outcome of a match in which a

chained bear was pitted against several dogs.

When negotiations to renew their lease stalled in 1598, Lord Chamberlain's Men made the decision to completely dismantle "The Theatre" and transport all of the lumber across the Thames where they built the Globe Theatre (legend has it that they completed the entire operation in a single night).

This new theatre would serve as home to Shakespeare's productions and held the distinction of solely presenting plays whereas other Elizabethan playhouses were forced to supplement their income with the occasional bear-baiting match.



Figure 9: The interior of the Globe Theatre in London

PUBLIC THEATRES

Playhouses like the Globe were known as “public theatres”, and they were the dominant form of permanent theatre in London until 1610. While most live theatres today feature a proscenium stage, public theatres during the Elizabethan era were not unlike modern baseball stadiums, albeit on a greatly reduced scale.

Three levels of covered seating galleries enclosed an open air courtyard while an elevated platform stage thrust out into the center of the courtyard.

A small roof covered the stage and was painted to look like the “heavens” from which actors could be lowered using ropes and pulleys. From the roof of the theatre, a flag was flown to

signal that a play was being performed that day.

The back of the stage also contained a balcony which could be used by the actors (think *Romeo and Juliet*) or the musicians (think *12th Night*).

Additionally, the rear of the stage contained at least two entrances for the actors which

led directly backstage to the “tiring” house where props and costumes were stored (“tiring” is short for “attire” – it’s where the actors literally changed their costumes).

COSTUMES AND SETS

Theatrical costuming during Shakespeare’s life played an important if not entirely accurate role in the staging of plays with the vast majority of the costumes made up of

contemporary Elizabethan attire (although there is some evidence that occasional attempts were made to costume historical characters in attire befitting the depicted time period).

One aspect of Elizabethan theatre which might prove particularly odd for modern audiences was the general lack of sets. For the most part, acting companies during

Shakespeare’s life didn’t utilize large scenery, primarily because it just wasn’t practical.

With the constant threat of theatre closures ever present as a result of outbreaks of the plague, theatre companies needed to be ready to go on tour in order to stay in business. Transporting large sets while on tour would have been nigh impossible – thus, playwrights like Shakespeare



Figure 10: Elizabethan clothing

relied on the text of the plays to paint a scenic picture for the audiences.

AUDIENCES

With no curtain between the audience and the stage, public theatres like the Globe were actually quite intimate even though each performance could accommodate between 2,000 and 3,000 patrons.

Attendees who paid a penny could stand in the courtyard for the duration of the show and were known as “groundlings”.

For those willing to pay more, seats in the covered galleries were available. Nobility often sat in the balcony at the back of the stage (as much to be seen as to see the show).

PRIVATE THEATRES

A second, less common type of playhouse emerged during Shakespeare's life: the “private theatre”. These theatres were indoor venues which used candlelight to illuminate the performances.

Additionally, admission to a play at a private theatre was considerably more expensive

than a ticket to a public theatre like the Globe. Hence, audiences at a private theatre tended to be wealthier.

Shakespeare's theatre company owned and operated a private theatre known as Blackfriars Theatre. They began presenting plays in 1609 with the theatre in operation during the winter months in which the Globe was shuttered.

The venue appears to have been a profitable one with the theatre bringing in nearly double what the Globe generated.

Indeed, with two successful playhouses continually presenting plays, Shakespeare's theatre company perfectly epitomizes the growth and development of English drama during the Renaissance.

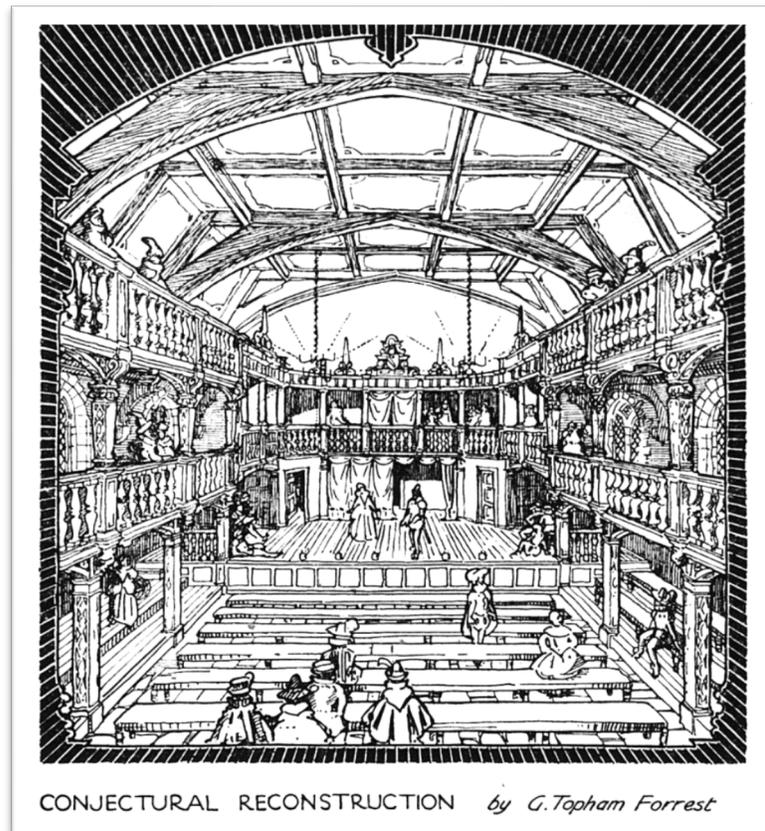


Figure 11: A drawing of Blackfriars Theatre

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

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