

Shakespeare and his Theater

Compared to the technical theaters of today, the London public theaters in the time of Queen Elizabeth I seem to be terribly limited. The plays had to be performed during daylight hours only and the stage scenery had to be kept very simple with just a table, a chair, a throne, and maybe a tree to symbolize a forest. Many say that these limitations were in a sense advantages. What the theater today can show for us realistically, with massive scenery and electric lighting, Elizabethan playgoers had to imagine. This made the playwright have to write in a vivid language so the audience could understand the play. Not having a lighting technician to work the control panels, Shakespeare had to indicate whether it was dawn or nightfall by using a speech rich in metaphors and descriptive details. Shakespeare's theater was far from being bare, the playwright did have some valuable technical sources that he used to the best of his ability. The costumes the actors wore were made to be very elaborate. Many of the costumes conveyed recognizable meanings for the audience such as a rich aristocrat wearing silk clothes with many ruffles. Many times there were musical accompaniments and sound effects such as gunpowder explosions and the beating of a pan to simulate thunder.

The stage itself was also remarkably versatile. Behind it were doors for exits and entrances and a curtained booth or alcove useful for actors to hide inside. Above the stage was a higher acting area which symbolized a porch or balcony. This was useful in the story of Romeo and Juliet, when Romeo stood below Juliet and told her how he loved her. In the stage floor was a trap door which was said to lead to "hell" or a cellar, this was especially useful for ghosts or devils who had to appear and disappear throughout the play. The stage itself was shaped in a rectangular platform that projected into a yard that was enclosed by three story galleries.

The building was round or octagonal in shape but Shakespeare called it a "wooden O." The audience sat in these galleries or else they could stand in the yard in front the stage. A roof and awning protected the stage and the high-priced gallery seats, but in the case bad weather, the "groundlings," who only paid a penny to stand in the yard, must have gotten wet. The Globe theater was built by a theatrical company in which Shakespeare belonged. The Globe theater, was the most popular of all the Elizabethan theaters, it was not in the city itself but on the south bank of the Thames River. This location had been chosen because, in 1574, public plays had been banished from the city by an ordinance that blamed them for corrupting the youth and promoting prostitution. A playwright had to please all members of the audience. This explains the wide range of topics in Elizabethan plays. Many plays included passages of subtle poetry, of deep philosophy, and scenes of terrible violence. Shakespeare was an actor as well as a playwright, so he knew well what his audience wanted to see. The company's offered as many as thirty plays a season, customarily changing the programs daily. The actors thus had to hold many parts in their heads, which may account for Elizabethan playwrights' blank verse writing style.

