

The Globe Theater



The Globe Theatre was an early English theatre in London where most of William Shakespeare's plays were first presented. It was built in 1599 by two brothers, Richard and Cuthbert Burbage, who owned its predecessor, The Theatre.

In the winter of 1598, the lease on The Theatre was due to expire because of an increase in rent. The Burbage brothers decided to demolish the building piece by piece, ship the pieces across the Thames River to Southwark on the south bank, and rebuild it there. The reconstructed theatre was completed in 1599 and was renamed The Globe.

The shares of the new building were divided among the Burbage brothers and William Shakespeare, who had been one of the leading players of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a popular group of actors, since late 1594. The Lord Chamberlain's Men continued to perform at The Globe.

The exact physical structure of the Globe is not known, although scholars are fairly sure of some details because of drawings from the period. The theatre itself was a closed structure with an open courtyard where the stage stood. Tiered galleries around the open area accommodated the wealthier patrons who could afford seats, and those of the lower classes--the "groundlings"--stood around the stage during the performance of a play. The space under and behind the stage was used for special effects, storage, and costume changes. Surprisingly, although the entire structure was not very big by modern standards, it is thought to have been capable of accommodating fairly large crowds--perhaps as many as 2000 people--during a performance.

Some people believe that the Globe was identical to another theatre, The Fortune. It is said to have been shaped like a cylinder, with a thatched gallery roof which was made of straw. The roof had to be coated with a special fire-protectant. In 1613, the roof was accidentally set on fire by a cannon during a performance of Henry VIII. The entire theatre burned in about an hour. The Globe was rebuilt a year later, but with a tilted gallery roof and more circular in shape. In 1644, 30 years after it was rebuilt, the Globe was torn down.

In September 1999, a reconstructed Globe Theatre opened in London, 500 years after the first plays were performed in the original theatre. The late Sam Wanamaker, an American actor, was responsible for the Globe's modern reconstruction. When he visited London in the late 1940s, he was disappointed to find nothing marking the site of the original Globe Theatre. He eventually came up with the idea of reconstructing The Globe in its original location. Progress was slow, however. The Globe Playhouse Trust was not founded until the 1970s, and the actual construction of the new theatre did not begin until the 1980s.



from Marchette Chute's *Shakespeare of London*

Acting was not an easy profession on the Elizabethan stage or one to be taken up lightly. An actor went through a strenuous period of training before he could be entrusted with an important part by one of the great city companies. He worked on a raised stage in the glare of the afternoon sun, with none of the softening illusions that can be achieved in the modern theater, and in plays that made strenuous demands upon his skill as a fencer, a dancer, and an acrobat.

Many of the men in the London companies had been "trained up from their childhood" in the art, and an actor like Shakespeare, who entered the profession in his twenties, had an initial handicap that could only be overcome by intelligence and rigorous discipline. Since he was a well-known actor by 1592, and Chettle, an English publisher and playwright who died in 1607 says he was an excellent one, he must have had the initial advantages of a strong body and an Elizabethan good voice and have taught himself in the hard school of the Elizabethan theater how to use them to advantage.

One of the most famous of the London companies, that of Lord Strange, began its career as a company of tumblers, and a standard production like "The Forces of Hercules" was at least half acrobatics. Training of this kind was extremely useful to the actors, for the normal London stage consisted of several different levels. Battles and sieges were very popular with the audiences, with the upper levels of the stage used as the town walls and turrets, and an actor had to know how to take violent falls without damaging either himself or his expensive costume.

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Nearly all plays involved some kind of fighting, and in staging hand-to-hand combats the actor's training had to be excellent. The average Londoner was an expert on the subject of fencing, and he did not pay his penny to see two professional actors make ineffectual jabs at each other with rapiers when the script claimed they were fighting to the death. A young actor like Shakespeare must have gone through long grueling hours of practice to learn the ruthless technique of Elizabethan fencing. He had to learn how to handle a long, heavy rapier in one hand, with a dagger for parrying in the other, and to make a series of savage, calculated thrusts at close quarters from the wrist and forearm, aiming at either his opponent's eyes or below the ribs. The actor had to achieve the brutal reality of an actual Elizabethan duel without injuring himself or his opponent, a problem that required a high degree of training and of physical coordination.

The cheaters and inn-yards were frequently rented by the fencing societies to put on exhibition matches, and on one such occasion at the Swan a fencer was run through the eye and died, an indication of the risks this sort of work involved even with trained, experienced fencers. The actors had to be extremely skilled, since they faced precisely the same audience. Richard Talleton, a comic actor of the 80's who was the first great popular star of the Elizabethan theater, was made Master of Fence the year before he died and this was the highest degree the fencing schools could award.

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Another test of an actor's physical control was in dancing. Apart from the dances that were written into the actual tests of the plays, it was usual to end the performance with a dance performed by some of the members of the company. ' A traveler from abroad who saw Shakespeare's company act Julius Caesar said that "when the play was over they danced very marvelously and gracefully together," and when the English actors traveled abroad, special mention was always made of their ability as dancers. The fashion of the time was for violent, spectacular dances and the schools in London taught intricate steps like those of the galliard, the exaggerated leap called the "capriole" and the violent lifting of one's partner high into the air that was the "volte." A visitor to one of these dancing schools of London watched a performer do a galliard and noted how "wonderfully he leaped, flung, and took on"; and if amateurs were talented at this kind of work, professionals on the stage were expected to be very much better.

In addition to all this, subordinate or beginning actors were expected to handle several roles in an afternoon instead of only one. A major company seldom had more than twelve actors in it and could not afford to hire an indefinite number of extra ones for a single production. This meant that the men who had short speaking parts or none were constantly racing about and leaping into different costumes to get onstage with a different characterization as soon as they heard their cues. In one of Alleyn's productions a single actor played a Tartar nobleman, a spirit, an attendant, a hostage, a ghost, a child, a captain, and a Persian; and while none of the parts made any special demands on his acting ability, he must have had very little time to catch his breath. The London theater was no place for physical weaklings; and, in the same way it is unsafe to assume that John Shakespeare must have had a strong, well-made body or he would not have been appointed a constable in Stratford; it is safe to assume that he must have passed the inheritance on to his eldest son.

There was one more physical qualification an Elizabethan actor had to possess, and this was perhaps more important than any of the others. He had to have a good voice. An Elizabethan play was full of action, but in the final analysis it was not the physical activity that caught and held the emotions of the audience; it was the words. An audience was an assembly of listeners and it was through the ear, not the eye, that the audience learned the location of each of the scenes, the emotions of each of the characters, and the poetry and excitement of the play as a whole. More especially, since the actors were men and boys and close physical contact could not carry the illusion of love-making, words had to be depended upon in the parts that were written for women.

An Elizabethan audience had become highly susceptible to the use of words, trained and alert to catch their exact meaning and full of joy if they were used well. But this meant, as the basis of any successful stage production, that all the words had to be heard clearly. The actors used a fairly rapid delivery of their lines and this meant that breath control, emphasis, and enunciation had to be perfect if the link that was being forged between the emotions of the audience and the action on the stage was not to be broken. When Shakespeare first came to

London, the problem of effective stage delivery was made somewhat easier by the use of a heavily end-stopped line, where the actor could draw his breath at regular intervals and proceed at a kind of jog-trot. But during the following decade this kind of writing became increasingly old-fashioned, giving way to an intricate and supple blank verse that was much more difficult to handle intelligently; and no one was more instrumental in bringing the new way of writing into general use than Shakespeare himself.

Even with all the assistance given him by the old way of writing, with mechanical accenting and heavy use of rhyme, an Elizabethan actor had no easy time remembering his part. A repertory system was used and no play was given two days in succession. The actor played a different part every night, and he had no opportunity to settle into a comfortable routine while the lines of the part became second nature to him. He could expect very little help from the prompter, for that overworked individual was chiefly occupied in seeing that the actors came on in proper order, that they had their properties available, and that the intricate stage arrangements that controlled the pulleys from the "heavens" and the springs to the trapdoors were worked with quick, accurate timing. These stage effects, which naturally had to be changed each afternoon for each new play, were extremely complicated. A single play in which Greene and Lodge collaborated required the descent of a prophet and an angel let down on a throne, a woman blackened by a thunderstroke, sailors coming in wet from the sea, a serpent devouring a vine, a hand with a burning sword emerging from a cloud, and "Jonah the prophet cast out of the whale's belly upon the stage." Any production that had to wrestle with as many complications as this had no room for an actor who could not remember his lines.

Moreover, an actor who forgot his lines would not have lasted long in what was a highly competitive profession. There were more actors than there were parts for them, judging by the number of people who were listed as players in the parish registers. Even the actor who had achieved the position of a sharer in one of the large London companies was not secure. Richard Jones, for instance, was the owner of costumes and properties and playbooks worth nearly forty pounds, which was an enormous sum in those days, and yet three years later he was working in the theater at whatever stray acting jobs he could get. "Sometimes I have a shilling a day and sometimes nothing," he told Edward Alleyn, asking for help in getting his suit and cloak out of pawn.

The usual solution for an actor who could not keep his place in the competitive London theater was to join one of the country companies, where the standards were less exacting, or to go abroad. English actors were extravagantly admired abroad and even a second-string company with poor equipment became the hit of the Frankfurt Fair, so that "both men and women flocked wonderfully" to see them. An actor like Shakespeare who maintained his position on the London stage for two decades could legitimately be praised, as Chettle praised him, for being "excellent in the quality he professes." If it had been otherwise, he would not have remained for long on the London stage.

