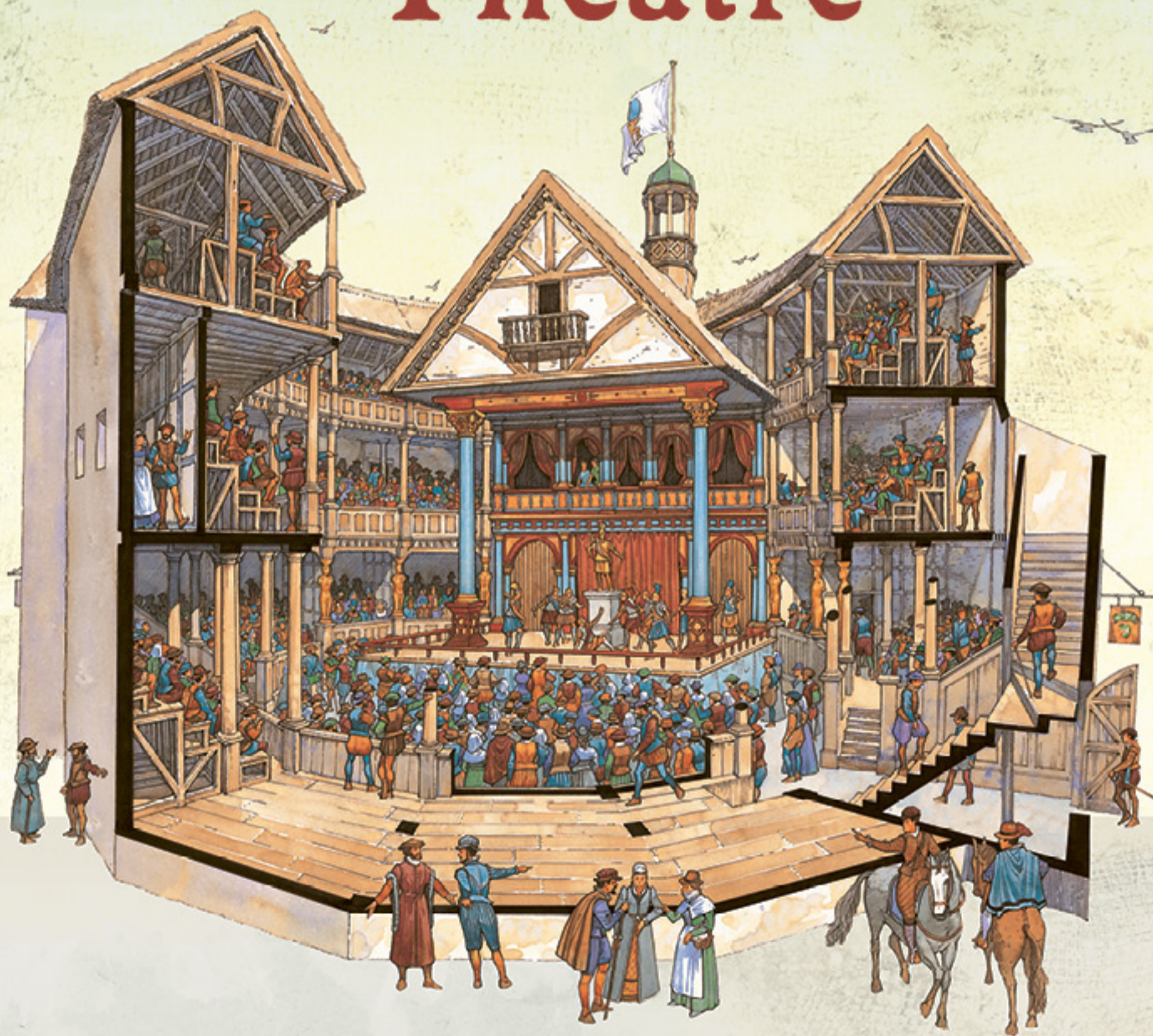




A Shakespearean Theatre



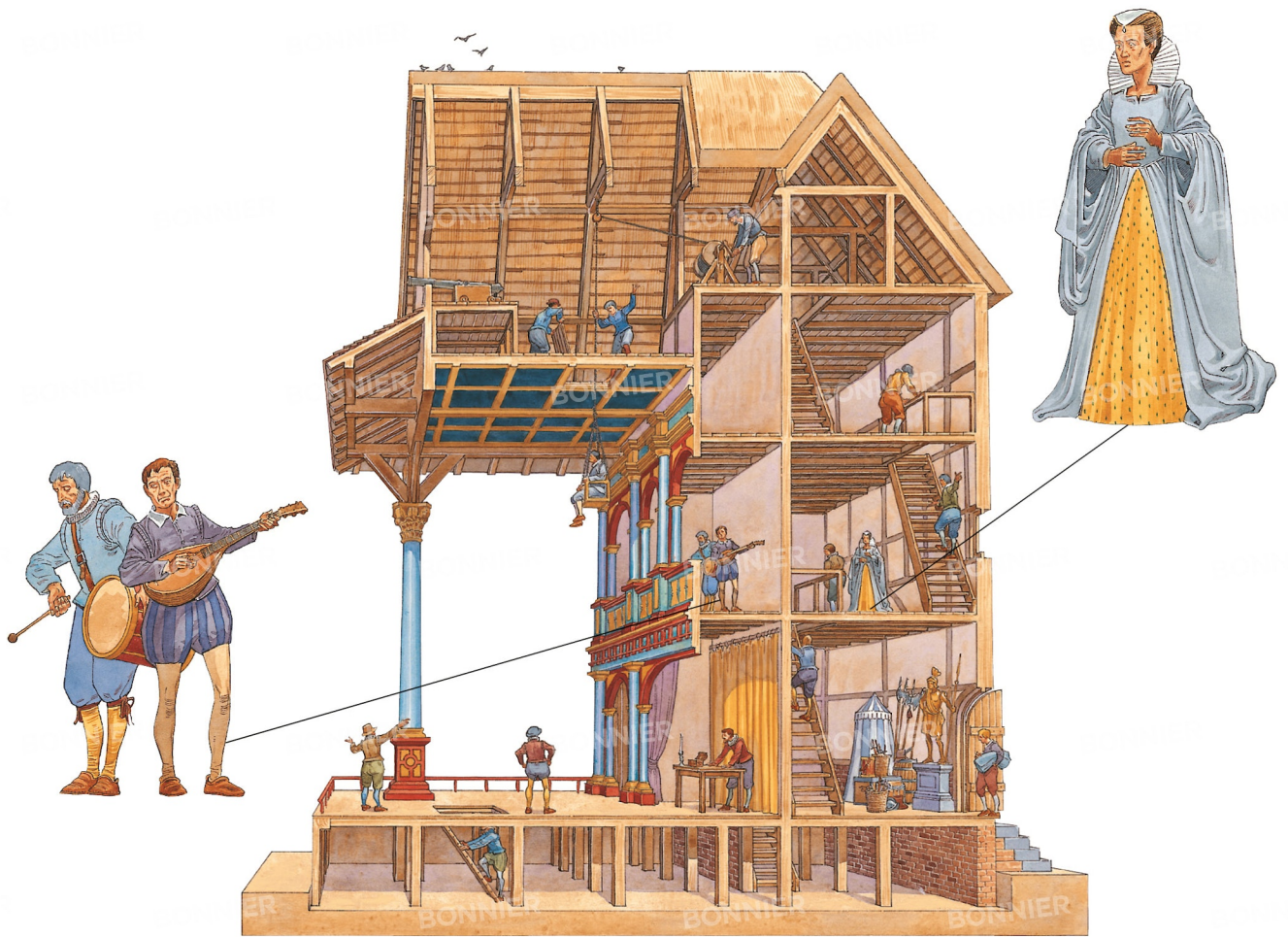
Written by

Jacqueline Morley

Illustrated by

John James

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him."



"The evil that men do lives after them;" Julius Caesar, Act III Scene II



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Published by

Book House, an imprint of

The Salaria Book Company Ltd

25 Marlborough Place, Brighton BN1 1UB

Please visit the Salaria Book Company at:

www.salaria.com

ISBN 978 1 905638 59 8

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

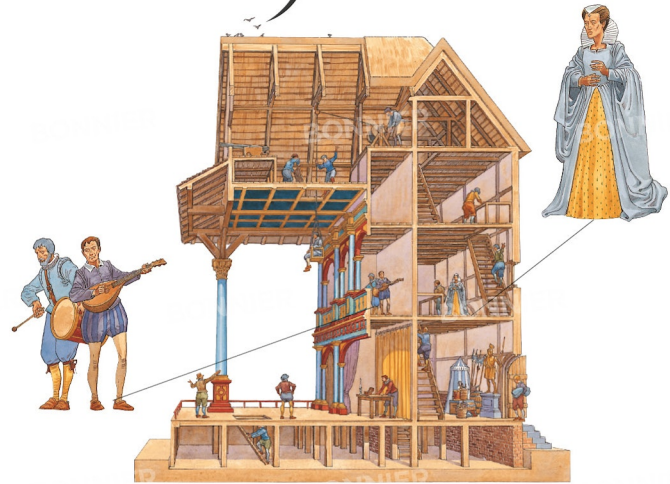
Printed and bound in China.

Printed on paper from sustainable forests.
Reprinted in MMXVII.



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"But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

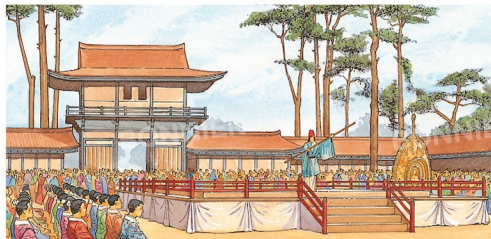
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon," Romeo and Juliet, Act II Scene II

THE ORIGINS OF THEATRE

THE IDEA of a theatre – a place where live actors perform – is very old and began in the ancient world. The first theatres were holy places, often temple forecourts, where priests performed songs and dances to honour their gods. Worshipers gathered to watch and, in time, seating was added along with an acting area where performers recreated the sacred legends of the gods. For both actors and audiences these performances were religious ceremonies. The notion that theatres were places where people went solely to be entertained did not arise till Roman times.



In the East, just as in the West, theatres arose out of religion. Eastern theatres have kept much closer ties with it. This Chinese theatre (above) was in the forecourt of a temple c. AD 1500. It was a temporary building, probably erected specially for a festival.



The ancient sacred dance, Bugaku, was performed in Japanese temple forecourts (left). Based on thousand-year-old Asian court dances, Bugaku is still performed on ceremonial occasions, at shrines or before the imperial court.

In early drama actors wore traditional masks, such as this Japanese Bugaku mask (above), to show the roles they played.



Bugaku mask

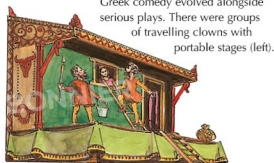


All over the world people worship through dance. Images of Ancient Egyptians, c 1550 BC, show them dressed as animal gods dancing in honour of their god Bes (above). Drama, which is role-playing before an audience, grew out of dances like this.

The first theatres of the western world grew out of arrangements for celebrating the festival of Dionysus, the Ancient Greek god of fertility and wine. A group of men called the chorus chanted songs and danced in a circle surrounding an altar to the god. In 6th-century BC Greece a new ingredient was introduced – single performers who exchanged comments with the chorus. This was how actors and plays came into being. Spectators watched from a semi-circle of open-air seating in Greek theatres.



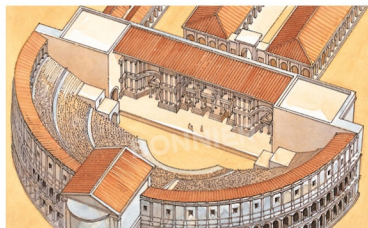
Ancient Greek theatre



Greek comedy evolved alongside serious plays. There were groups of travelling clowns with portable stages (left).

Greek actor holding the mask he will wear throughout the play

Roman theatre c. 55 BC



Though based on the Greek idea, ancient Roman theatres were much bigger and had no central altar (right). By that time (1st century BC) theatre-going was no longer a religious event. People expected to be entertained with large spectacles and plenty of violent action. The focus of attention was now the stage, behind which was a wall of elaborate mock buildings from which the actors emerged.



This Ancient Greek 'horse' and rider (above), c. 550 BC, was part of a chorus dancing in honour of the sea god Poseidon.

Indian temple performers, around the 10th century AD, worshipped the Hindu god, Krishna (above).

Native Americans of one of the Sioux tribes danced to summon their great Bear Spirit.

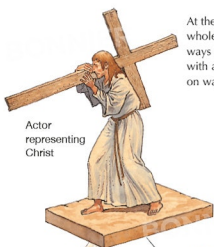
Tutsi dancers from Central Africa performed a lion dance to quell evil spirits.

MEDIEVAL ENTERTAINMENT

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH denounced the Roman taste for stage violence and the comedy that mocked religion. In the 6th century AD the Church closed all theatres and banned them forever. After that the only entertainers left were the wandering street performers. But in time, almost accidentally, the Church itself revived play-acting. In the early Middle Ages, on Church festival days, priests began to enact short scenes from Christian stories during services. Most people at this time could not read so this was a good way of teaching them. Each scene was given a simple setting and as the scenes grew in number settings were put up all round the church. These little plays drew such audiences that as time went on there was no longer enough room for them inside the churches. The scenes had to be staged outdoors.

At the feast of Corpus Christi scenes telling the whole Bible story took all day to perform. The ways of staging them varied – on fixed stands with audiences going from one to the next, or on wagons that travelled the streets.

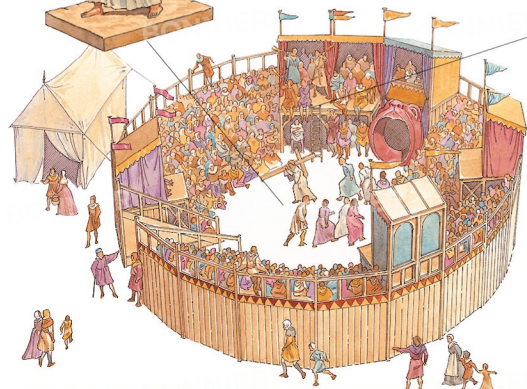
In the 15th-century French version of the plays (below) a ring of stands provided both seats for the audience and settings for the action. These included Hell's Mouth and Heaven with a ladder leading up to it. The actors performed in the centre.



Actor representing Christ



One of heaven's trumpeters



By late medieval times the actors and musicians performing the scenes were townsfolk rather than priests. With so many parts to be cast, local people had to be called in. Soon they were also organising the acting and staging.



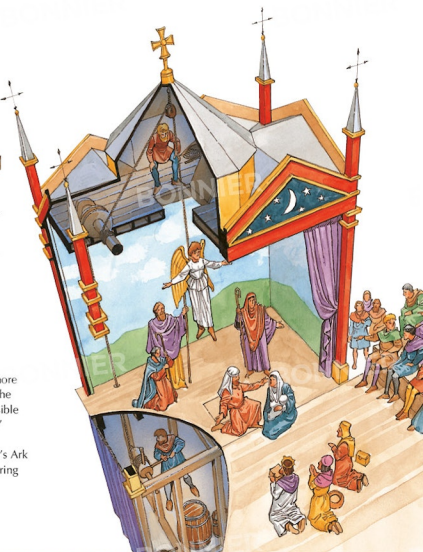
Person dressed as the Devil



When local people began taking part they added comedy to the plays. The Devil was a favourite comic character.

Scenes were staged on wheeled stands called 'pageants' that were pulled through the town in procession (above). People waited at points along the way for each pageant to stop, give its performance and move on. In the scene above, the Devil has leapt out of Hell's Mouth to defy God's messenger.

With the whole community joining in, the plays grew more elaborate and the pageants more decorated. It became the custom for each of the town's trade guilds to be responsible for staging a scene, usually connected with its members' trade. The goldsmiths performed the Magi bringing gifts (right), the bakers the Last Supper, the shipwrights Noah's Ark and so on. Some later pageants had machinery for lowering characters from the sky. This was not a new idea – the Ancient Greeks had used similar equipment.



A company of wandering players travelled with its cartload of gear (below). They needed only a few costumes and props, food for the journey and bedding for the night.



Players often set up their stage on a village green (above). Plenty of people came to watch but would try to get out of paying if they could.

Occasionally travelling players managed to talk the lord of a manor into letting them play in the hall of his manor house. But if he had heard bad accounts of them he would send his steward to turn them away. They then had to trudge on to the next town.



Audience member trying to get in without paying

There were more opportunities in a large town. It was quite common to find a bull-baiting or bear-baiting ring, where animals were set upon by dogs in a sport people enjoyed watching then. These rings were open-air wooden enclosures with viewing stands all round and an entrance door. This made it easier to ensure people paid as they came in. The rings could hold large audiences standing in the central space where the animals normally fought (below).



TRAVELLING PLAYERS

WHENEVER there was an event that drew big crowds, such as a market in the town square or a Church festival, wandering entertainers appeared, hoping that people would pay to be entertained. While theatres were banned, generations of actors, acrobats and comedians were forced to travel in search of audiences, wandering from place to place in the carts they used as stages. Serious minded people disapproved of them. Acting in the religious plays was a different matter – people were not paid for that. But these performers expected to be paid for something not regarded as work. Professional entertainers were called ‘players’.

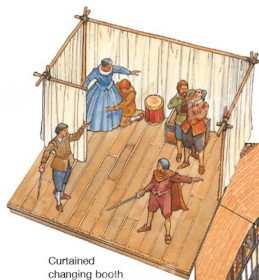
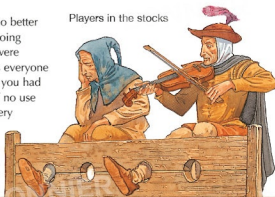
By the 16th century, travelling actors were beginning to form themselves into companies to act ‘travels’ – stories containing several characters. This type of entertainment was growing in popularity and companies performed wherever they could, upon makeshift stages of boards and trestles.



Wandering beggars (above) were common in 16th-century England.

Many people thought players were no better than beggars, asking for money for doing nothing of value. Like beggars they were ‘masterless men’. In the Middle Ages everyone in a useful trade served a master – if you had no master you were seen as being of no use in the world. Unless they behaved very carefully players risked being treated like beggars – put in the stocks or driven out of town.

Players in the stocks



Curtained changing booth

An inn’s yard (below) was another good place to perform in. They were busy places so there was always a good audience.

Players soon had their stage set up in a yard. Actors entered and exited via a booth at the back, which also served as a changing room (left). Inn audiences were often rowdy and this sometimes earned players a bad reputation. At the next destination they might be turned away by guards at the town gate (below).



PURITANS AND PLAYERS

PLAYING IN LONDON

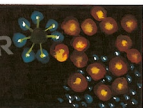
SIXTEENTH-CENTURY LONDON was a vibrant, growing city. By the 1570s its population of over 100,000 made it one of the largest cities in Europe. It was also one of the richest. Its luxury shops, specialist markets, streets and inns thronged with traders that made it a magnet for anyone hoping to make a fortune. Among those drawn to London were the companies of players. Some Londoners, especially the religious-minded people known as Puritans, were not at all pleased to see so many players. They claimed that play-acting in inn yards caused bad behaviour. Plays, said the Puritans, were 'the nest of the Devil and the sink of all sins'. But despite these criticisms more and more people flocked to the plays.



Puritans objected to the crowds of rowdy drinkers that plays attracted to the inns.



Puritans claimed people would rather follow a trumpet call to a play than a bell to church.



People living near the inns complained of the constant din from music and fireworks.



St. Paul's Cathedral

The medieval cathedral of St Paul's, the largest in England, had lost its great spire in a fire of 1561.

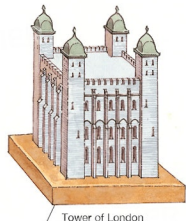


Cheapside, the largest market, was crammed with country folk selling produce.

Much of 16th-century London was overcrowded and filthy. Its narrow side streets stank with refuse tipped from windows.



The London of the 1570s was still ringed by medieval walls. The only way into the city from the south was over London Bridge (below).



Tower of London

The 11th-century Tower of London was a famous landmark. Built by the Normans to keep Londoners under control, it was a fortress, a prison and a palace.



With no roof to deaden noise, sound effects like drums and cannon fire were a nuisance.



Playgoers were not the quietest of people. They hissed, stamped and yelled comments at the players.



The Lord Mayor wrote to the Privy Council about people being injured by falling scaffolds and stages.



The city authorities received constant complaints about the players, especially from the Puritans. In response the authorities created all sorts of rules designed to keep players out of the city.



BUILDING THE THEATRE

ENGLAND'S FIRST THEATRE

PLAYERS WERE ANXIOUS to show they were respectable. The best way to do this was to persuade a nobleman to be their patron. This meant the players performed for him whenever he wished and in return they could claim to be his 'men' or servants. They got no pay from him but his title gave them status. One of the best companies of the 1570s was the Earl of Leicester's Men and its manager, James Burbage, was a shrewd businessman. He believed his company could attract much bigger audiences than an inn yard could hold and he came up with a bold idea. He rented some land outside the city walls, where the city council had less control, and there he put up abuilding specially designed for staging plays. This was England's first purpose-built theatre.



Burbage shared his brainwave with his brother-in-law and partner, John Brayne.

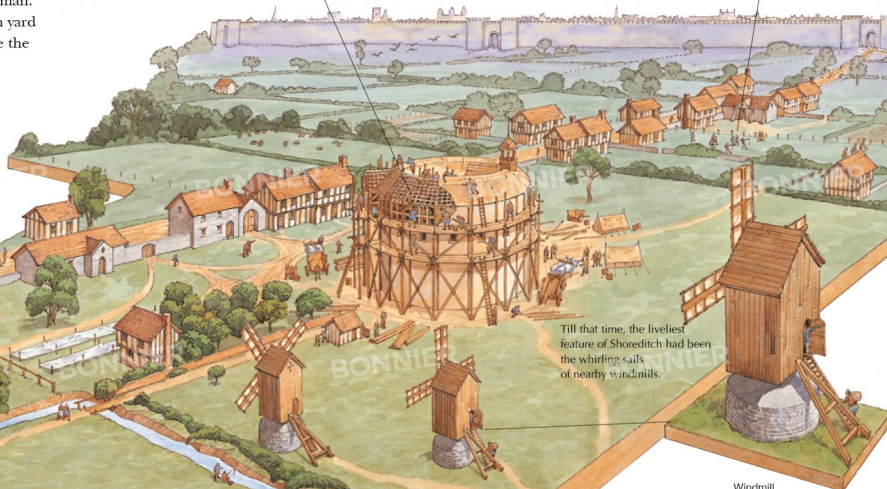


The design they created owed a lot to Brayne's experience of fitting up large yards for plays.



Burbage and Brayne borrowed some money and signed a lease to rent the land for 21 years.

The land Burbage rented was in Shoreditch, by a road that ran north from the city. The countryside was still very close to London in those days. Open fields and orchards lay just beyond the city walls. In the surrounding fields, women spread out clothes just washed in the stream (far right). Among the orchards were tenterfields where newly-dyed cloth was stretched to dry (right).



Till that time, the liveliest feature of Shoreditch had been the whirling sails of nearby windmills.

Windmill



The Theatre's plan may have been based on the practical layout of bear-baiting rings, from which it had several galleries surrounding a central yard. A platform stage projected into the yard.



The long and expensive oak timbers needed for the framework were cut and fitted at the builder's yard.



Each piece was marked to show its position. Then the frames were taken apart to be reassembled at the site.



Carpenters on site re-erected the frame by matching the marks. The timbers were joined with wooden dowels.



The frame of the theatre was filled with wattle and plastered over. The building appeared circular but was actually formed of many short sides.



The central yard was open to the sky but the galleries were roofed, most probably with thatch.



We know the interior had carved and brightly painted ornament, because it was described as 'gorgeous'.



The stage was probably much like the movable ones of boards and trestles used by travelling players.

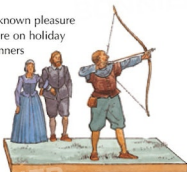


There were three tiers of seating around the yard but none in the centre. The audience there had to stand throughout each play.



Completing the theatre walls

Shoreditch was already a well-known pleasure spot. London families came there on holiday afterwards to see the Tower gunners firing cannon in the Artillery Garden or to watch archery practise in nearby Finsbury Fields (right). Burbage called his new playhouse 'The Theatre'. It opened in 1576 and was an immediate success.

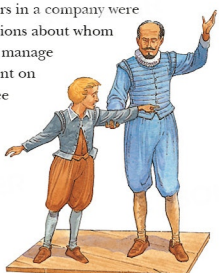


RUNNING THE COMPANY

LONDON soon had several more theatres, built by speculators who saw them as a good source of income. In return for letting a company of players use his building, an owner expected to receive half their takings. The other half was divided among the company's 'sharers' – the people who had provided money to start the company and were entitled to a share in its profits.

Sometimes the leading players in a company were also its sharers. They made the decisions about whom to hire, what plays to do and how to manage the company's budget. Its money went on costumes, writer's fees, a licensing fee for each new play and wages for the 'hired men'. These included actors, musicians and people working backstage.

Preparation work began early in the new theatres (right). On stage one of the leading players might be coaching his young apprentice, showing him how to stand and move like a woman. Boys played all the female roles because acting was considered a most unsuitable occupation for women.



Player and young apprentice



Writer

Audiences expected a different play every day of the week and wanted new ones all the time. Writers were hired to create plays constantly. Good plays helped to make a company's fortune. Their texts were kept under lock and key so that rival companies could not steal them. Burbage's company was lucky – its permanent writer was William Shakespeare.



After a performance the takings were counted out and divided into shares.



It is reported that Burbage and his partner had a terrible row over the takings.



Members of the company read through a new play to decide whether it was worth buying from the author.



The book-keeper, in charge of the 'book' or list of each play, was rather like a modern stage manager.



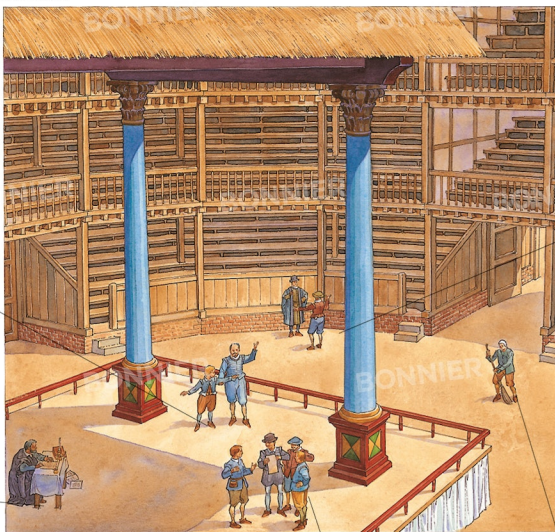
Tieren looked after the 'attire' (costumes). This took the largest part of the company's budget.



Stagkeepers did all manner of jobs, such as carrying props on stage, wheeling in scenery and keeping things clean.



Musicians with drums and sackbuts were needed in the plays and for the jig that ended each performance.



Theatre owners were usually wealthy, while the players tended to be much poorer. Players often borrowed money from the owners. Owners were usually willing to lend it, as they knew they could help themselves to the player's share of the takings as repayment.



Hired men waiting to rehearse

Hired men (left) played the minor roles in plays. If the company could not afford to employ enough of them they each had to take several parts in one play.



Theatre owner discussing a loan with a player

AN ACTOR'S CAREER



An actor might have started out at about the age of ten, by being apprenticed to a leading player.



The player hired his apprentice to the company. When not acting he was sent on errands.

The previous audience's litter was swept up by one of the stagkeepers (odd-job men). Like the supporting actors, firemen, musicians and gatherers (who collected the entry money), stagkeepers were hired and had no share in the company's profits.



Young apprentices began with child roles, but would soon have been portraying women most convincingly.



Stagkeeper



By his late teens a young actor had to persuade the company to keep him on for male parts.

CRISIS AT THE THEATRE

JAMES BURBAGE had built his Theatre on rented land which its owner had agreed he could use for 21 years. In 1597 the time was up but when the Burbage family tried to make a new agreement, the landlord refused to sign. He claimed that the Burbages had been bad tenants; they had not stuck to the terms of the agreement and had no further right to the land or the building that stood on it. James Burbage himself was dead by this time and his two sons had inherited the Theatre. They did not mean to let the landlord rob them of their building. They rented another plot of ground on Bankside, across the river, and hired a builder to pull the Theatre down and cart its timbers over. There they built a new theatre which they named the Globe.

While the Burbages' workmen were still dismantling the Theatre, the landlord got to hear of it and tried to have it stopped. A fight broke out between the Burbages' workers and the landlord's men.

Fight between Burbage's and the landlord's men

DISPUTE WITH THE LANDLORD



While the Burbages had been his tenants the landlord had put up with quite a lot of trouble.



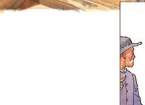
Once, when the landlord's agent came to collect the rent, Burbage's son Richard chased him off threateningly with a broom.



Old Burbage had invested in an indoor theatre, but neighbours complained and he had been forbidden to use it.



Having nowhere else to act, the Burbage sons had to rebuild. They raised money by selling shares in the new theatre.



Five leading players in the company agreed to buy shares, meaning the rebuilt theatre belonged to all seven.



Meanwhile the Shoreditch landlord sued for damages, complaining about the way the timbers had been hauled around.

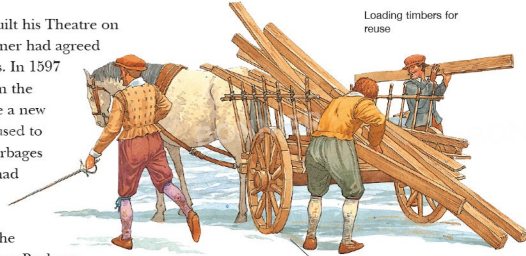


He said that tramping feet and carts had ruined his grass. There is no record of how the case was settled.



The landlord did not get ownership of the Theatre as he had hoped. It was whisked away to be rebuilt elsewhere.

Loading timbers for reuse



The most valuable part of the Theatre's structure was its wooden framework. The main timbers were loaded onto carts and taken across the river for re-erection on the new site. These extra-long timbers were expensive and reusing them saved the company a lot of money.

The landlord's agent brought an order from him forbidding demolition of the Theatre. He later sued the Burbages for trespassing on his land, claiming that their men, 'armed with many unlawful and offensive weapons', had acted in a 'very outrageous, violent and riotous sort'.

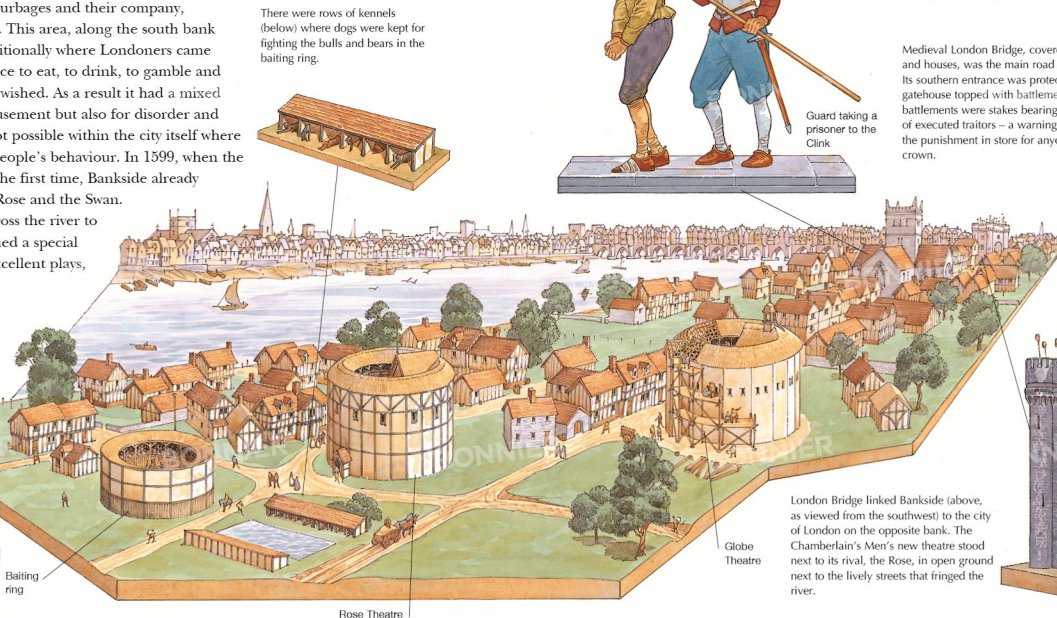
Landlord's agent



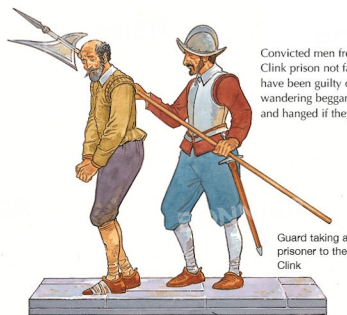
BANKSIDE

RESITING THEIR THEATRE ON BANKSIDE was a natural choice for the Burbages and their company, the Chamberlain's Men. This area, along the south bank of the Thames, was traditionally where Londoners came to enjoy themselves. It was the place to eat, to drink, to gamble and to feel free to be as rowdy as they wished. As a result it had a mixed reputation – a great place for amusement but also for disorder and crime. Such entertainment was not possible within the city itself where the authorities' rules controlled people's behaviour. In 1599, when the Globe Theatre opened there for the first time, Bankside already had two competing theatres, the Rose and the Swan. Play-loving Londoners poured across the river to all three, but the Globe soon earned a special reputation for good acting and excellent plays, written by Shakespeare.

In the Bear Garden, Bankside's bear-baiting ring, a blind bear was led out to be beaten by men with sticks.



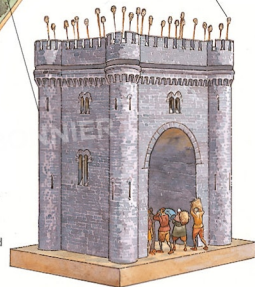
There were rows of kennels (below) where dogs were kept for fighting the bulls and bears in the baiting ring.



Guard taking a prisoner to the Clink

Convicted men from Bankside were taken to the Clink prison not far from London Bridge. They might have been guilty of nothing worse than being a wandering beggar, but could be whipped for that and hanged if they were caught wandering twice.

Medieval London Bridge, covered with shops and houses, was the main road to Bankside. Its southern entrance was protected by a gatehouse topped with battlements. Along these battlements were stakes bearing the rotting heads of executed traitors – a warning to Londoners of the punishment in store for anyone disloyal to the crown.



London Bridge linked Bankside (above, as viewed from the southwest) to the city of London on the opposite bank. The Chamberlain's Men's new theatre stood next to its rival, the Rose, in open ground next to the lively streets that fringed the river.

LONDON PLEASURES



Bowling, a favourite 16th-century sport, was not like today's quiet game. Bowling alleys were often also gambling dens.



Bankside had a bull-baiting and a bear-baiting ring where tethered beasts fought until they were exhausted.



Watching bulls or bears being set upon by dogs was considered to be great entertainment.



Cockfighting was another cruel sport which people in those days thoroughly enjoyed and bet upon.



The large number of gambling houses on Bankside was a reason why many people disapproved of the area.



Londoners out for a good time were sure to find it. There were lots of places to meet and to dance.



The amount of alcohol available in Bankside taverns often led to drunken brawling in the streets.



Bankside attracted cheats and ruffians of all sorts. If caught, culprits could be flogged.



Though not officially an entertainment, the public execution of criminals always drew large crowds. Seeing someone being hanged was meant to discourage crime but really people enjoyed watching.

A PLAYER'S DAY



Players had to be at the theatre early in the morning for rehearsal. If they were late, they were fined.



If it started to rain, it meant that afternoon's performance might have to be cancelled.



Once the weather cleared the flag was hoisted to proclaim there would be a performance that day.



At rehearsal, players might revise the stage moves of an old play to be performed again that afternoon.

INSIDE THE GLOBE

THE GLOBE was a twenty-sided building holding around 3,000 people – a big audience for a theatre, even by today's standards. No one knows exactly what its interior was like, but judging from a sketch a visitor made of a similar theatre, the Swan, it must have looked very much like this (opposite). The players entered through two doors on either side of the stage at the back. These led from the tiring room, a cramped area where players got dressed and waited to come on stage. Between the doors, a small recess, normally hidden by a curtain, served as a stage within the stage. The curtain could be drawn back during a scene to reveal a surprise: people seated at a table, a tomb with a body, or a lurking spy.

The illustration (opposite and below) shows the inside of the Globe during a performance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Caesar is just about to be murdered. Apart from the large statue pushed on stage especially for the scene, there is no scenery and no curtain to divide the stage from the audience. In the yard people crowded round the stage just as they did in the inn yard performances.



Stage



There was no time to stop for lunch so apprentices would be sent out to get everyone pie and ale.



Two of clock – time for the play to start. From the tiring room a player could peek at the size of the audience.

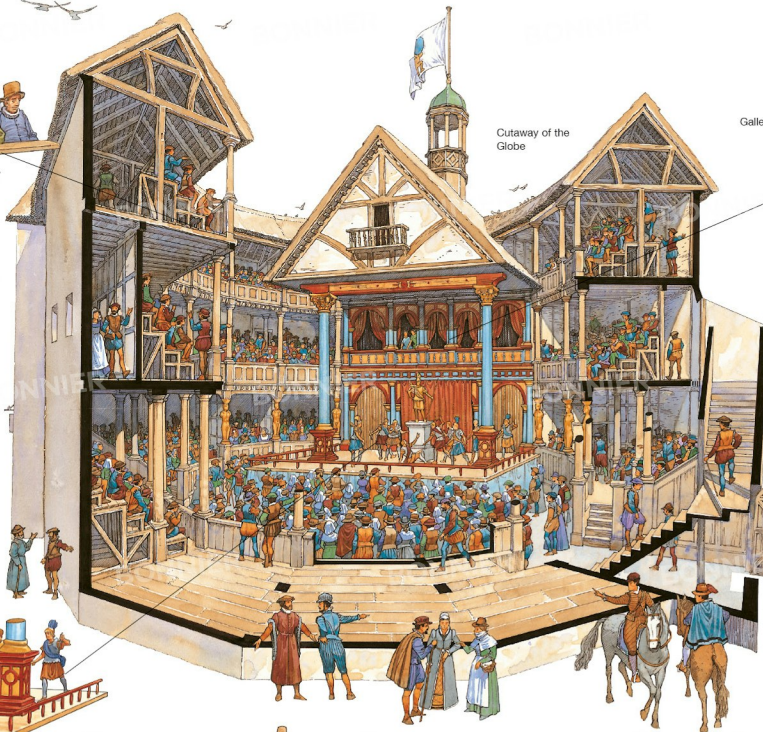


If a play was late starting the audience showed their disapproval by hurling nuts and apples at the stage.



A trumpet blast announced that the players were about to begin and everyone became quiet.

People paid a penny (half the price of a pint of good ale) to enter the Globe. Those who wanted to sit paid another penny at the two stairways leading to the galleries. A seat with a cushion cost a further penny.



Cutaway of the Globe

Gallery



The gallery above the stage (above) was where the musicians usually played. If the gallery was not needed for this, or for battlement or balcony scenes, nobles could sit there to watch the play. They got a good view and avoided mixing with the crowd.

The stage was sheltered by an overhanging roof. The pillars, the rear of the stage and the ceiling over the stage were lavishly ornamented. The room in the roof held stage machinery (see page 27).



Backstage, the bookkeeper ensured that each player was ready for his cue and that the props were all to hand.



The tiring man had everything ready to help with quick costume changes between scenes.



Occasionally the writer revised lines at the last minute. With up to 20 new plays a year to learn, players could easily get their lines muddled.



Work was not over when the play ended. The cast often loaded up to give a private evening performance in the city.



The end of the day was the first chance to study a new part but players were probably too exhausted by then!

THE AUDIENCE

GOING TO A PLAY, especially a new one, was a major excitement in the days when television and cinema did not exist. It appealed to everyone from courtiers and rich city merchants to the poorest craftsmen and labourers. As soon as a playbill was posted up in the street people crowded round to see what was on offer. They expected a different play almost every day of the week. Favourites were put on repeatedly but not for long periods of time.

From one o'clock in the afternoon people began surging over the river to the theatre. Some came on foot over London Bridge, but everyone who could afford it hired one of the Thames wherrymen to row them across.

Gentlewomen of a well-to-do family (above) who wished to see a play had to be accompanied by a man. This was a sign that they were respectable and not to be spoken to by anyone who did not know them. A male servant was enough for this purpose.

A rich lord and lady (above) would have sat in the best sections of seating, known as the lords' rooms, closest to the stage. Foreign ambassadors and high-ranking nobles expected to be given a seat in the musicians' gallery.

There were no tickets for performances so people who wanted a good view came early. There was often a lot of jostling to get in – the ideal opportunity for cutpurses to get to work. There were lots of them in the crowd.

Performances were given without an interval, so bread, ale and fruit sellers traded with the audience throughout the play.



Gatherers with boxes took the entrance money. Dishonest ones scratched their heads to disguise dropping coins down their backs!



Very important people were led through the players' entrance into the tiring room and upstairs to the gallery.



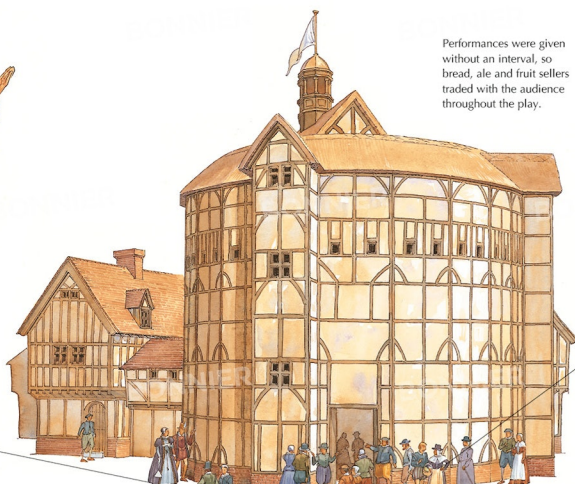
It was as well to keep an eye on one's purse. Sixteenth-century clothes had no pockets, so cutting purse straps was an easy job for a thief.



People paid attention if they liked a play but were quick to decide if they did not.



Lord and lady



Fruit seller

People who stood in the theatre yard were called groundlings. Respectable shopkeepers with their families rubbed shoulders with household servants, fishwives, soldiers, seamen, poor artisans and workmen of all kinds.



Male servant

Gentlewomen



Artisans

THE STAGE

THE STAGE OF THE GLOBE was still basically the platform that travelling players had used but with a permanent roof overhead. As soon as the last of three trumpet blasts warned that the play was starting, the opening players strode onto stage. They had to capture the audience's attention at once, without the help of a rising curtain or dimmed lights. Everything depended on the way they moved and spoke. Voices and gestures had to be commanding, so the style of acting was more exaggerated than we are used to today. Star players drew the crowds. At the Globe, the Chamberlain's Men could count on big audiences for their lead player, Richard Burbage. He was a great tragic actor and was the first to play Shakespeare's great characters, Othello, Hamlet and King Lear.



Devils or ghosts could spring from the ground via the trapdoor in the stage.



Fingering back the central curtain could reveal a surprise that gave the plot a twist.



The wide side doors allowed big props such as thrones, thrones and trees to be wheeled on.



For a big procession, even stagekeepers and gatherers had to dress up and come on stage.



The audience loved processions. People in the galleries stood up to get a better view.

Props



The same 'props' (left) were used in many plays and were a big part of the company's assets. Carrying or pushing them on and off stage was the job of the stagekeepers.



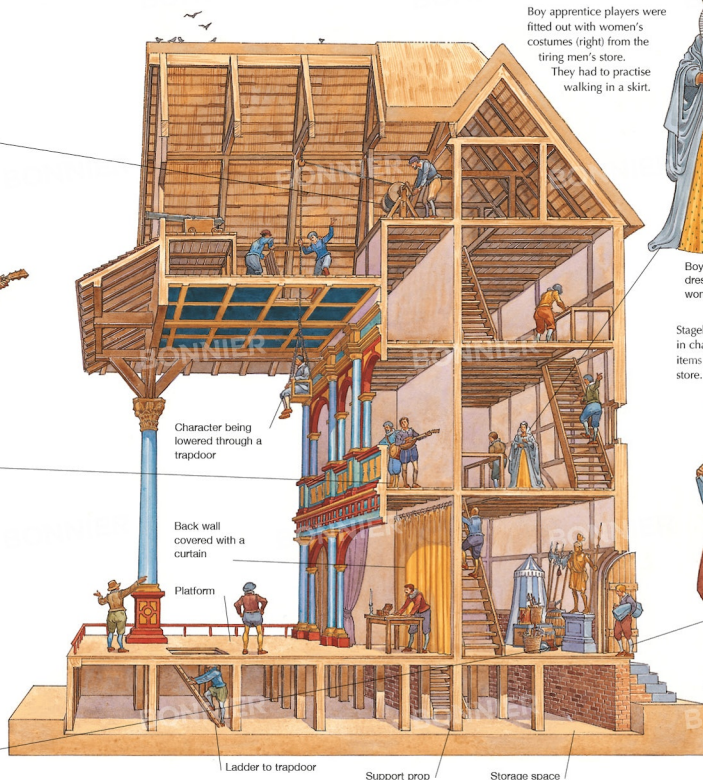
Operating the winding gear



Musicians in the gallery

In the gallery, a drummer and a lutanist awaited their cues (above). Music, from lutes, sackbuts, trumpets and pipes was an important element in most plays and for the jig (comic dance) that was performed afterwards.

There was no stage scenery of the sort we are used to today. The setting of a scene was indicated by bringing an appropriate object on stage, such as a throne, a general's tent, or a box hedge to hide behind.



Character being lowered through a trapdoor

Back wall covered with a curtain

Platform

Ladder to trapdoor

Support prop

Storage space

The platform of the stage (above) was at the groundings' eye level so that they all had a clear view of the players. It was supported by strongly-braced wooden props, allowing for storage space in-between. There had to be space left for players to surprise the audience by gaining entry to the stage via a ladder and trapdoor.

The underneath of the stage was hidden at the front by boards or by cloth hangings that could be altered to suit the play. The back wall of the stage could be altered too, with tapestries, banners and painted cloths.

Boy apprentice players were fitted out with women's costumes (right) from the tiring men's store. They had to practice walking in a skirt.



Boy apprentice dressed for a woman's role

Stagekeepers were in charge of keeping items in the props store.



Stagekeeper

BACKSTAGE

THE DOORS AT THE BACK OF THE STAGE led into a cramped room where the players got ready and waited to come on. It was known as the 'tiring house' because it was related to the players' costumes or 'attire'. Clothes hung everywhere and tirmen made last-minute adjustments to the players' costumes. Tables and benches were covered with parts to learn, written out on long rolls of paper, drums and armour, false beards, wigs and make-up. The bookkeeper was in charge in the tiring house and ensured that the stagekeepers assembled the right props for each play and that the players needed for each scene were dressed and knew their cues. Throughout the performance he was ready, with the 'book' of the play in his hand, to prompt if necessary.



A hidden bladder of pig's blood was squeezed under the armrest to create the illusion of bleeding.



Thunder was sounded by a roll of drums or a cannonball rolled over a sheet of metal.

Stagekeeper



Stagekeepers checked that the yard was full and the rest of the audience was seated before giving the go-ahead to the trumpeter on the stairs. The trumpeter then ran up to the roof to sound the opening trumpet blast.



Eldrsong was created by blowing through a pipe into a jar of water.



Trumpeter

Stairs to upper floors

Player reading plot



Players studied the 'plot' of the day's play to help them keep track of what they had to do. The plot was a summary that the bookkeeper made and kept handy. It noted who was in each scene and when they were due on and off stage. As each day's play was different from the last, people needed some reminding!

If not on stage in a particular act, Shakespeare could continue working on a text (below). His major contribution to Burbage's company was the two plays a year he wrote for it. Few playwrights employed by companies had such a good reputation. It was regarded as a hack job and was not well paid.

Shakespeare at work



THE BOOKKEEPER'S JOB



The bookkeeper had to get each play licensed by an official called the Master of the Revels.



He then employed a scrivener (a professional copyist) to write out all the parts.



Often hired men had to be several characters in one play. The bookkeeper organised this.



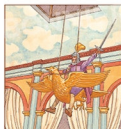
He recorded all production details to ensure performances ran smoothly.



A 'beheading' needed a special spit-top table, fitting like the stocks. Its sides were covered with a cloth or boards.



In the space above the stage (known as the heavens) a player acting the part of a god could wait for his cue.



A drumroll of thunder disguised the creaks of the winding gear as the player descended from the clouds.



region known as 'hell', a player in the role of a ghost could wait to rise from a tomb. He had to duck sideways

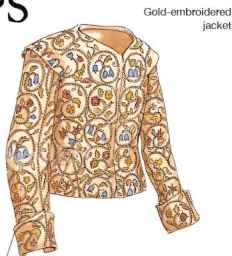


as the tapdoor fell, to avoid getting a nasty bump on the head.

COSTUMES AND PROPS

COSTUME was a company's biggest expense. The clothing had to be sumptuous – people in those days were used to seeing magnificently-dressed processions in the streets, such as the Lord Mayor and his officials, great nobles and their servants, Queen Elizabeth I and her attendants. The stage kings, queens and nobles had to look just as fine in the glare of the public, in broad daylight. Very often the players really were wearing the clothes of the court. Fashions changed so fast that, after wearing them only a few times, nobles gave exquisite silk garments to their servants to sell to the theatres. No wonder that the heaviest fine a player could be punished with was for leaving the theatre still dressed in his costume!

In the tirmen's workshop (right) last minute work was done on costumes for the new play being performed the next day. One or two of the players may have needed a final fitting and old costumes could be remodelled to fit new players. Costumes brought out of storage needed checking to ensure moths hadn't ruined them. Completed garments were hung ready on a rail.



Gold-embroidered jacket

Helmet for a pikeman



Felt hat



Gentleman's pearl-encrusted leather glove

Headgear (right) was an important part of any costume, for at this time everyone always wore some form of head covering, even in bed.



Costumes were so essential that companies would borrow money to buy them and promise to repay the loan with future takings.



We know from theatre accounts that tirmen spent large sums on fabric and trimming.



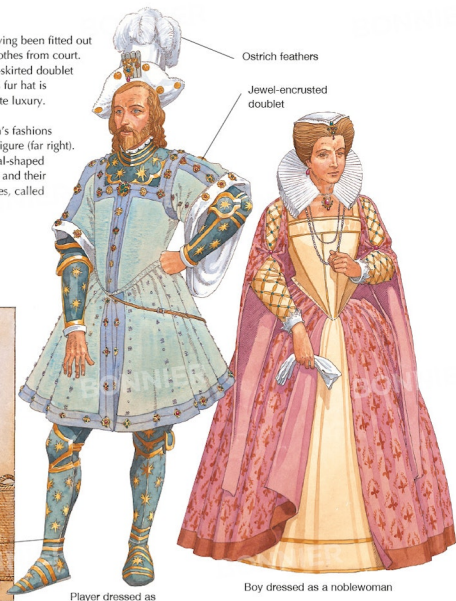
They would certainly have been on the look out for servants offering their employers' clothes for sale.



Its costumes were a company's most valuable possession. They were kept carefully in locked chests.

These two players (right) are shown having been fitted out with some magnificent second-hand clothes from court. The man wears a jewel-encrusted long-skirted doublet over a suit of star-spangled armour. His fur hat is topped with ostrich feathers.

The rigid shape of 16th-century women's fashions made it easy to give a boy a woman's figure (far right). Their bodies were imprisoned in conical-shaped corsets with whalebone reinforcements and their skirts were held out over stiffened frames, called farthingales.



Ostrich feathers

Jewel-encrusted doublet

Player dressed as a nobleman

Boy dressed as a noblewoman

There is a record of a company paying twenty pence, ten shillings and sixpence for a black velvet cloak 'with sleeves embroidered all with silver and gold, lined with black satin striped with gold'. This was at a time when the average wage of a schoolteacher was fifteen pounds a year.



A tawny coat that was damaged by rats had to be mended with eight pounds in weight of copper lace.



Found on a company's property list: Neptune's fork and garland, Cupid's bow, hell's mouth and the cloth of the sun and moon.



People's ideas about the clothes of past ages were vague but there was an attempt at historical dress, such as a Roman general (above left) and 'medieval' costumes for a masque, or danced entertainment (above right).



In bad plague years there were so many deaths that bodies were collected nightly from households. They were piled onto carts and taken away to burial pits because there was no time to give each a separate grave.

Face covered for fear of catching the disease

Houses where there had been plague deaths were marked with a red cross warning people not to enter (below). The occupants were not allowed to come out for fear they would infect others. Food was passed to them through the windows.



The plague was believed to be God's way of punishing the sinful. This print (above) made at the time, shows death dancing on the coffins of Londoners and makes a prayer for mercy.

PLAGUE

LONDONERS DREADED the deadly illness known as the plague, which returned to the city regularly. Between 1592 and 1625 there were five particularly terrible plague years, in each of which 10% of the city's population died. At that time nobody understood what caused the plague but they knew it spread rapidly when lots of people were crowded together. Theatres and bear-baiting rings drew big crowds, so the authorities closed them down until the number of plague deaths had fallen below 50 a week (30 in some years) for three weeks running. When the summer heat brought a return of the disease, theatre companies were forced to load up their carts, leave London and return to the life of travelling players.



In the worst plague years few people were given the luxury of a coffin and winding sheet – many bodies were flung into pits as they were.



Foul air was thought to spread diseases so fires were lit to purify it.



Lime was put in the burial pits to help the piles of bodies rot.



Notices announcing the closure of theatres were posted up on playhouse walls.



The coughing of those infected spread the plague, so banning large crowds was a good idea.



Everyone who could fled London. Players' wagons joined the queues leaving the city.

SPREAD OF THE DISEASE



Ships from abroad carrying infected rats first brought the plague to London.



We now know that the plague was spread to humans by fleas.



The fleas picked it up from the huge population of rats in London.



People thought pomanders (spice-scented balls), held to the nose, gave protection from plague.

ON TOUR

HAVING TO GO ON TOUR was not good news for the players. To meet the costs of travel, companies cut down on the numbers going, so many hired men lost their jobs. Those that joined the tour had to manage on rough food and lower pay, or no pay at all if audiences were poor. Some companies went abroad, others tried their luck in towns and villages at home, travelling long distances and lodging in uncomfortable draughty barns and lofts. Players put a brave face on it and entered each town with a great display of jollity, but often they received an unfriendly welcome. People feared they might have brought the plague with them and they were not allowed to perform unless the town mayor gave his permission. If he refused he might give them some money anyway, out of respect for their noble patron. The mayor was really paying them to go away.



A helpful mayor might have paid for a show and invited leading citizens as his guests.



If the mayor was worried about the plague he was more likely to have turned the players away.



A manager whose company acted when forbidden was turned into prison.



Turned out of town without a bed, players had to spend the night under their cart.

To make sure that everyone in town heard about them, players made a really noisy arrival. The whole company paraded through the streets, singing catchy tunes and dancing merrily.



A small touring company of nine men enter another town

To make a good first impression, the head of the company waved a banner showing the coat of arms of its noble patron. This might have persuaded the local constable to let the players in through the town gates.

Head of the company

Company's clown juggling for the crowd

Trumpeter

A trumpeter and a drummer led the way, making as much din as they could, while the company's clown performed all sorts of tricks and cracked jokes with onlookers. If he could get make them laugh they were more likely to come to see him in the show.

ROYAL ENTERTAINMENT

UNLIKE THE DISAPPROVING officials of the City of London, Queen Elizabeth I enjoyed watching plays. It was not customary in those days for kings and queens to go to performances at public theatres. Instead, the Master of the Revels, the official in charge of royal entertainment, arranged for the players to come to court. At festive times, such as Christmas, New Year and Shrovetide, the Queen expected lavish entertainments to keep herself and her courtiers amused. These might include half a dozen or more plays. Ensuring a ready supply of well-rehearsed plays for the court was the official reason for allowing companies of players to exist in the first place. Their public performances in theatres were officially classed as 'rehearsals' for their 'real' work – entertaining royalty or their noble patrons.

Only the best companies were called to court. The Chamberlain's Men from the Globe were the Queen's favourites and were asked to play twice as often as any other company. At Christmas 1596, for instance, they performed all six command performances.



Queen sitting beneath the royal canopy

Household official

As part of the Christmas festivities at Greenwich Palace the Queen asked the Chamberlain's Men to perform for her (opposite). They hoped for her approval of Romeo and Juliet, a new play by William Shakespeare.

The audience was assembled according to each person's rank. The Queen, sitting beneath a canopy symbolising royal power (above), took centre place. Less important people, such as the household official, were not given seats. It was not appropriate for them to sit in the Queen's presence.



The Queen called the players to whichever palace she was using at the time, perhaps Whitehall or Greenwich.



The players and their gear arrived by boat. Rowing along the Thames was the quickest way to get about at that time.



The Master of the Revels had to be told about the plays proposed, to make sure the Queen would like them.



For several days workmen were busy making a temporary stage and putting up festive decorations.



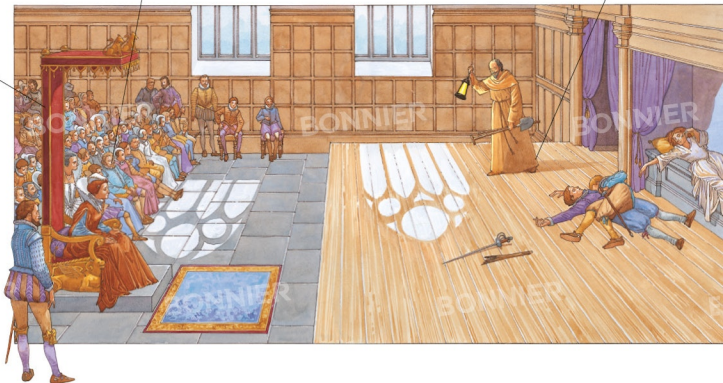
Important audience members

Other important audience members, such as a visiting foreign ambassador and his wife (left) and leading nobles, were seated at the front beside the Queen.

Romeo and Juliet is pictured, below, drawing to its tragic end. Friar Lawrence came to Juliet's tomb to rescue the lovers, but arrived too late. The role of the Friar (right) might well have been played by Shakespeare himself. He was an actor in the company, though there is no record of which parts he played.



Player in the role of Friar



The great hall of the palace had a screened-off passage at one end with two entrances and, above it, a minstrel's gallery. By putting up a platform it easily became a theatre. Much the same arrangements were made in medieval times when wandering players performed in the halls of manor houses.

Romeo and Juliet provided the sort of corpse-strewn action that Elizabethan audiences loved. Romeo kills his rival, Paris, and takes his own life believing Juliet to be dead. Waking from a death-like sleep, Juliet kills herself in grief.



The Queen expected to be pleased and amused. She did not allow religious or political matters to be mentioned in plays.



After the performance the players were treated to a lavish meal and plenty to drink, before going home.



James I, who was crowned in 1603, was a great lover of plays. He spent much more on them than Elizabeth had.



James made his favourites, the Chamberlain's Men, his personal players. They were renamed the King's Men.

FIRE!

THE PLAYERS AT THE GLOBE, through royal favour renamed as the King's Men, continued to attract large audiences to Bankside. One of their successes in 1613 was a play about Henry VIII in which Richard Burbage, the company's leading player, was outstanding as the King. The performance on 29th June provided more spectacle than anyone had bargained for. When King Henry arrived at Cardinal Wolsey's house, the cannon fire that greeted him set the theatre on fire. A spark landed on the thatched roof and set it smouldering. The fire travelled all round the thatch and had a good hold before anyone noticed it. A whiff of burning was nothing unusual in the theatre – and fireworks were routinely let off to liven up the action.

Once fire took hold in a timber building there was no hope of stopping it. There were no organised firefighters in those days, with powerful pumps and hoses. The only appliances available were hand pumps that squirted small amounts of water – and it is not very likely that there were any at the Globe. Within a couple of hours the whole building had burned to the ground. The King's Men at once set about rebuilding their theatre on its old foundations. By the following summer a second Globe had opened, by all accounts more splendid than the first.

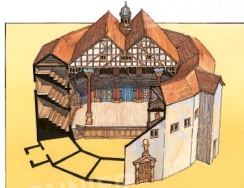
People who had arrived by boat found themselves taking to the river again sooner than they had expected (right). The Thames would have been a handy source of water to put out the blaze if there had been any way of pumping it to the fire.

The Globe had only two exits, at the foot of the two stair turrets. The audience – probably over 2,000 people – was lucky to have had enough time to escape.



BONNIER

We have quite a good idea of what the new Globe (right) looked like. A view of Bankside drawn in about 1640 shows the outside of the theatre and the twin gables over the stage. The inside, like that of the first Globe, can only be guessed at.



When a new play at the Globe was advertised with Burbage in the lead, there was lots of interest.



Crowds flocked to the theatre. By now the King's Men were the most popular players in London.



The cannon was probably fired from just below the thatch. There were no fire regulations in those days.

The smoky smell may have been disguised by the stink of tobacco. Smokers in the audience puffed on pipes throughout performances.



One man's breeches reportedly caught fire but the blaze was put out by drenching them with ale!



When they realised the danger people in the galleries posted to get down the stairs to safety.



The only method of getting water to the fire was to pass buckets from hand to hand along a human chain.

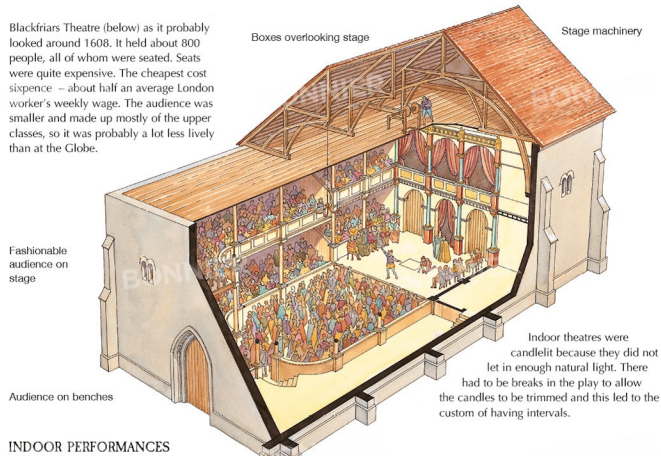


Builders were soon at work recreating the theatre, with certain improvements. This time the roof was tiled.

INDOOR THEATRES

JAMES BURBAGE SENIOR had originally created an indoor theatre from a hall in what had been Blackfriars priory (see page 18). The great halls of wealthy people's houses had traditionally been the place for private performances and this probably gave him the idea. Open-air theatres were not much used in winter and he saw that the way forward was to have fewer seats, for which people paid more, in an indoor theatre that could be used all year. His scheme did not work at first, as local residents objected to a public theatre. By 1608 attitudes had changed and the highly respected King's Men were allowed to reclaim their theatre. They spent summers at the Globe and winters at Blackfriars, which became London's first fully-professional indoor theatre.

Blackfriars Theatre (below) as it probably looked around 1608. It held about 800 people, all of whom were seated. Seats were quite expensive. The cheapest cost sixpence – about half an average London worker's weekly wage. The audience was smaller and made up mostly of the upper classes, so it was probably a lot less lively than at the Globe.



INDOOR PERFORMANCES



Masques were very popular because they relied on spectacular stage effects such as gods appearing from the sky.



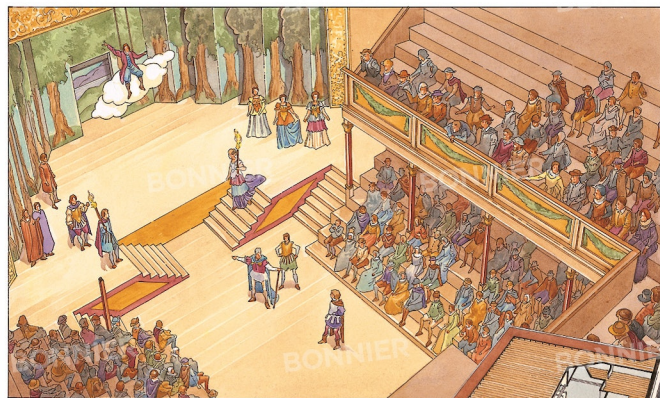
Monsters with machinery inside crossed the stage and strips of material were cut into waves and moved like the sea.



The idea of using interchangeable panels of painted scenery that slid in and out originated in Italy.

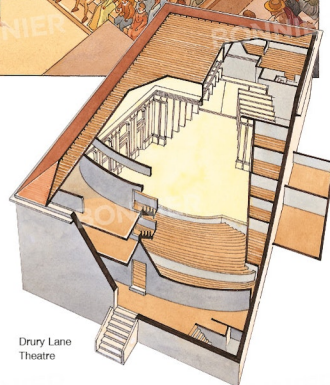


Tricks of perspective were used in the painted scenes, to make the audience feel they were looking into an open space.



Private indoor performances reflected the taste of the court and the nobility at the time, who enjoyed elaborate danced entertainments known as masques. Masques were performed for James I at Whitehall (above). The fashion for masques influenced the sort of entertainment that 17th-century public theatres provided and the spectacular scene changes required in masques affected the way theatres were designed.

Drury Lane Theatre was built in 1674. The stage (right) had much greater depth to allow for many panels of sliding scenery at the sides. There was a changeable backcloth instead of a rear wall with doors. Actors entered from between the panels instead of through doors in the back.



To increase the illusion of looking into a picture, the inner stage was framed by a proscenium arch.



Strict Puritans, who denounced theatregoing, became more influential in the 17th century.



When the Puritans gained power in the English Civil War they had theatres destroyed. The Globe was demolished in 1644.



Today on Bankside a replica Globe Theatre, opened in 1997, stages Shakespeare's plays in the setting he knew.

TIMESPAN

c. 2300 BC A papyrus of this date in the British Museum refers to a religious ceremony in which priests enacted the deeds of the gods.

c. 1000 BC The ancient Greeks honoured Dionysus, god of wine and fertility, in a festival of wild dancing. During the following centuries dance-drama became part of these festivals.

6th century BC By this time, the festivities for Dionysus had become formal ceremonies of dance and song performed by a chorus of 50 men. Prizes were given for the best song.

534 BC According to tradition, Thespis, a priest of Dionysus, won the competition in this year by introducing a performer who exchanged comments with the leader of the chorus. This produced the first dialogue in the history of the theatre.

c. 500 BC Outdoor theatres with tiers of stone seating and a performance area developed. Earlier arrangements had wooden seating for the audiences at these ceremonies.

From 27 BC Roman theatres in the Roman Empire, modelled on those of Greece, staged increasingly extravagant and violent entertainments.

AD 312 The Roman Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity. Laws were passed banning cruel entertainments.

AD 410 Theatres throughout the Roman Empire were closed after the sacking of Rome by Alaric the Visigoth.

AD 975 Drama was introduced into the service for Easter Sunday at the monastery of St. Gall, Switzerland.

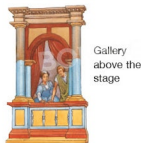


1264 Pope Urban IV established the church festival of Corpus Christi in June. It soon became the greatest day of the year throughout Europe for the performances of religious plays.

1501 At Mons, in what is now Belgium, the Corpus Christi

plays needed 67 different settings in the market place. They took 48 days to rehearse and four to perform.

15th-16th centuries
Meanwhile, professional troupes of travelling entertainers were developing 'interludes' (short plays) as part of their routines.



1564 Birth of William Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, England.

1572 Parliamentary Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds (wandering beggars) required every company of players to be authorised by a noble patron.

1570s City authorities began to complain that acting in inn yards caused disorder.

1576 James Burbage of the Earl of Leicester's Men built the Theatre, the first professional public playhouse in the modern world.

c. 1588 Shakespeare came to London and joined the company at the Theatre.

1592 London suffered the first of many terrible plague years during this period.

1594 Shakespeare was named as one of the players in Burbage's company (now the Chamberlain's Men) who acted before Queen Elizabeth I at Christmas.

Important audience members



1596 James Burbage put his money into converting part of old Blackfriars Priory in London into an indoor theatre but was not allowed to use it.

1596 The reputation of the Chamberlain's Men was so high that the Queen asked them to give all six of her Christmas command performances.

1597 James Burbage died. The Theatre (and the unusable Blackfriars) then belonged to his sons, Richard and Cuthbert. The lease of the Theatre expired.

1598 Landlord disputes led to the Theatre being pulled down and re-erected on Bankside as the Globe, financed by leading members of the Chamberlain's Men.

1599 Opening of the first Globe Theatre, where most of Shakespeare's greatest plays were performed. A German visitor, Thomas Platter, attended a play and his impressions, recorded in his journal, are first-hand evidence of what Elizabethan theatres were like.

1603 Death of Elizabeth and accession of James I. Making himself patron of the Chamberlain's Men, he renamed them the King's Men.

1608 The King's Men were allowed to use their building in Blackfriars as an indoor public theatre. From then on they performed in summer at the Globe and in winter at Blackfriars.

1613 The Globe Theatre was destroyed by fire but rebuilt and reopened by the following year.

1616 Death of William Shakespeare.



The new Globe, built in 1614

1619 Death of Richard Burbage.

1619 The Teatro Farnese in Parma, Italy, was the first theatre to be built with a proscenium opening framing its stage.

c. 1620 Painted panels of scenery (called flats), sliding in grooves, were introduced in Italy, to create swift scene changes.

1642-1660 Civil War in England. The Puritans ordered all theatres to be closed.

1644 The second Globe was demolished.

1970 American Sam Wanamaker launched a campaign to build a replica of the first Globe Theatre as close as possible to its original site on Bankside.

1997 First full season of performances at the new Globe.

GLOSSARY

Apprentice An unpaid trainee craftsman, serving a master craftsman for a fixed number of years, in return for free training.

Artisan A craftsman or mechanic.

Bear-baiting The 'sport' of watching dogs fight a chained bear in an arena. Bull-baiting, a similar entertainment, was also popular at this time.

Canopy A covering suspended over a throne or held over a person in a procession.

Chorus A group of singers and dancers in a religious festival. In ancient Greek drama the chorus expressed the feelings suggested by the action of the play.

Civil War The war that began in England in 1642 between the supporters of Charles I and those who opposed his policies. It led to the execution of King Charles in 1649 and the establishment of a republican state which lasted until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

Cockfighting Setting two cockerels to fight each other to the death and betting on which would survive.

Constable An official of a parish or town appointed to keep peace and order.

Corpus Christi A Christian festival established by Pope Urban IV in the 13th century. It is celebrated on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday.

Cue Words or action in a play that serve as a signal for another actor to speak, or a property or sound effect to be produced.

Cutpurse A thief who cut the straps of the purses in which people carried their money.

Dowel A headless wooden pin that joins two pieces of wood by penetrating both.

Fishwives Women who served at fish stalls in markets.

Gatherer A person who collected the audience's money at the theatre door.

Guild An association of people of the same craft or trade, formed to help and protect its members.

Licence A permission, issued by the government in return for a fee. Both Elizabeth I and James I were worried that plays might contain speeches that might make people rebellious. Granting or refusing a licence for a play was a way of censoring it and of raising tax.

Lutanist A performer who plays the lute, a stringed instrument.

Magi The three wise men who brought gifts to the infant Jesus.

Patron An important person who agrees to use his influence to protect others, in return for certain services.

Plague Bubonic fever, so called because it caused 'buboes' (swellings) in the groin and armpits.

Playbill An advertisement for a play.

Pomander A mixture of sweet-smelling spices, made into a ball and carried by a person as a protection against infection.

Portable Able to be carried.

Priory The dwelling of a community of friars, who were members of religious orders. Their buildings were confiscated by Henry VIII which explains why premises in Blackfriars were available for conversion.

Proscenium arch The large opening in the wall that separates the seating area from the acting area in a conventional theatre, through which the audience sees the stage. It was introduced in Italy

in 1619 and became a regular feature of European theatres.

Puritans People who believed in living a very simple life, based on Biblical teaching. They rejected the authority of bishops, who were supported by the King. This was one of the causes of the English Civil War.

Sackbut A bass trumpet, with a slide like that of a trombone for altering the pitch.

Shrove tide The Sunday, Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. In the 16th century there were a number of festivities just before Lent. Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday, is the Christian period of fasting before Easter.

Stagekeeper A stagehand who was expected to do all sorts of other jobs, from caretaking to playing walk-on roles.

Tawny Cloth of a brownish colour.

Tenterfield Open-air space in which lengths of newly-dyed cloth were hung to dry; tautly stretched on lines.

Tiremen Hired men in charge of costumes.

Wattle Thin strips of wood interwoven with twigs or flexible canes to form a panel.

Whalebone A horny substance found in the jaw of certain whales. Strips of it were used to stiffen clothes.

Wherry men The men who rowed wherries, rowing boats that acted like taxis, across the River Thames.

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