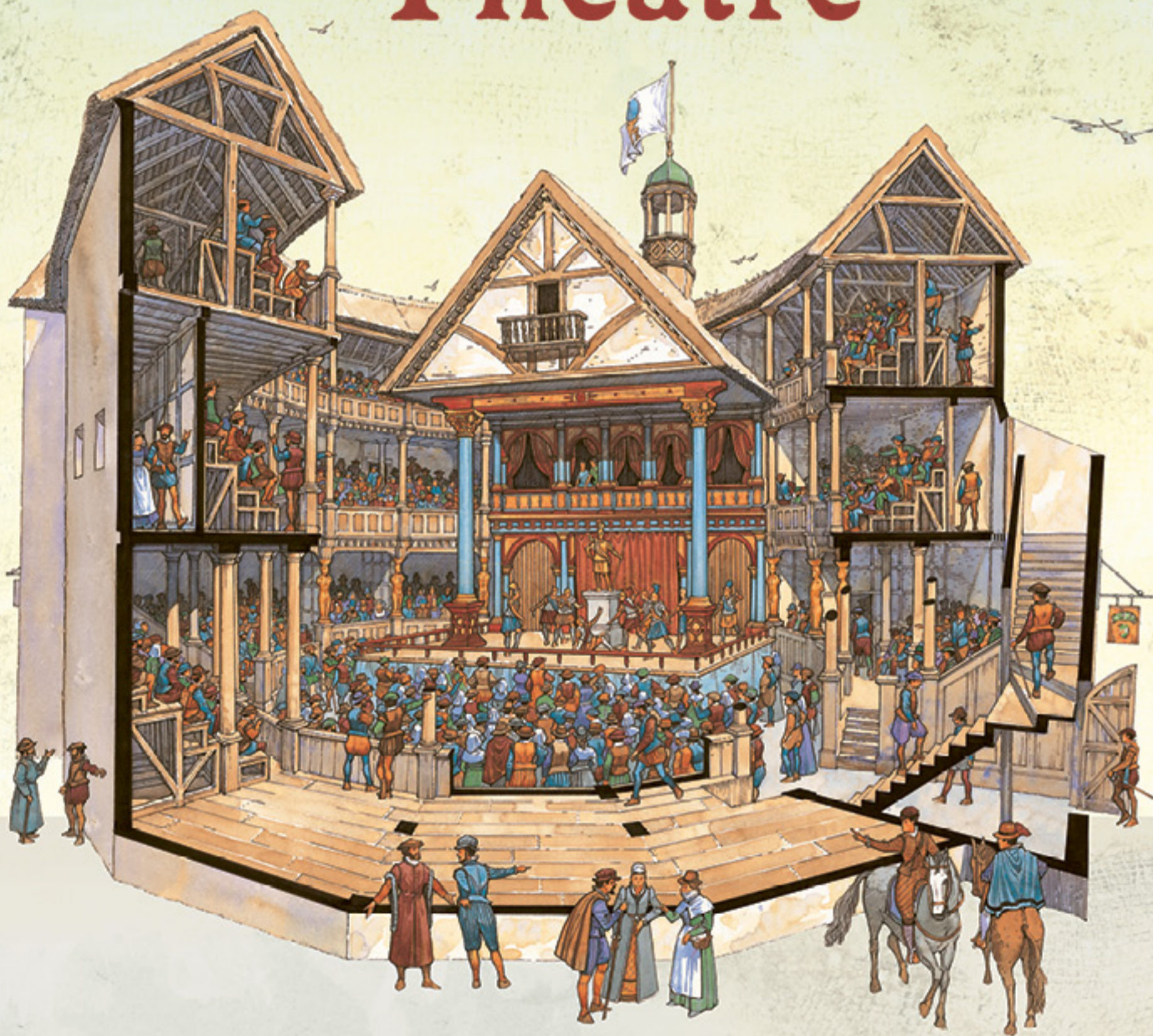


SPECTACULAR
VISUAL GUIDES



A Shakespearean Theatre



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PURITANS
AND PLAYERS

PLAYING IN LONDON

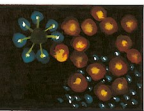
SIXTEENTH-CENTURY LONDON was a vibrant, growing city. By the 1570s its population of over 100,000 made it one of the largest cities in Europe. It was also one of the richest. Its luxury shops, specialist markets, streets and inns thronged with traders that made it a magnet for anyone hoping to make a 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.



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



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.

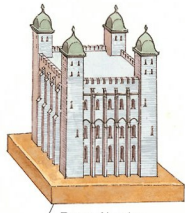


Cheapside, the largest market, was crammed with country folk selling produce.

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.



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.

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.



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



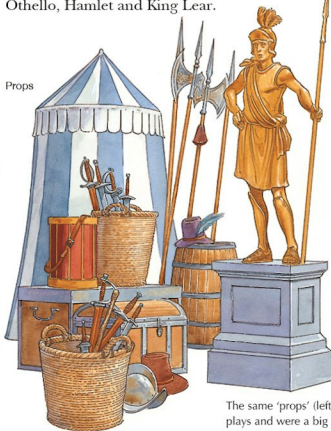
The wide side doors allowed big props such as chariots, thrones and trees to be wheeled on.



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

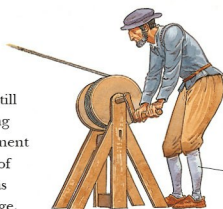


The audience loved processions. People in the galleries stood up to get a better view.



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.



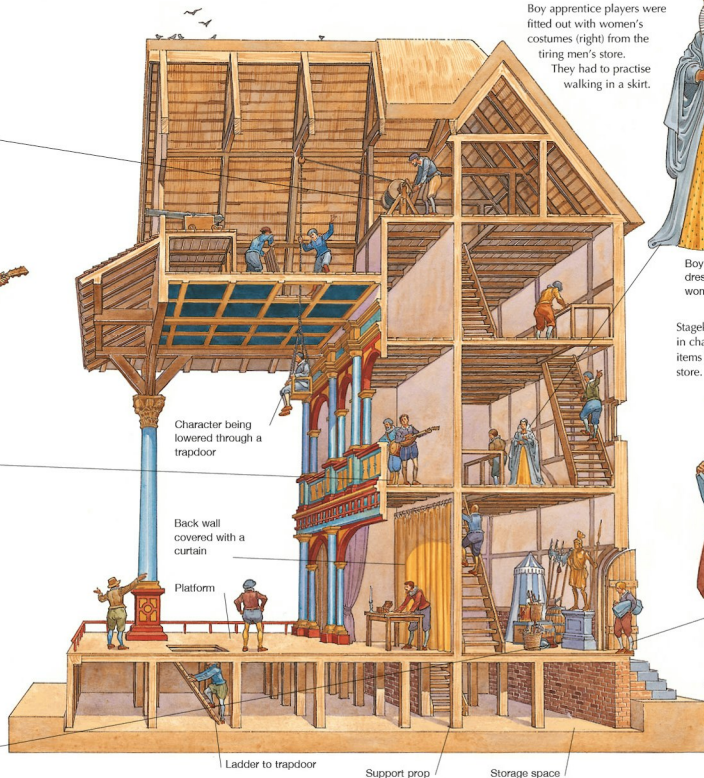
Operating the winding gear



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 groundlings' 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 practise 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 armpit 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.

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



A 'behending' 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. Below the stage, in the



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



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



He recorded all production details to ensure performances ran smoothly.

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 – guns and fireworks were routinely left 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.

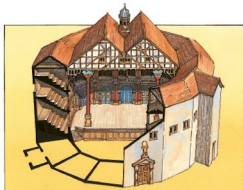
Within a couple of hours the whole building had burned to the ground. The King's Men at once set about rebuilding their theatre on its old foundations. By the following summer a second Globe had opened, by all accounts more splendid than the first.

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.



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.



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 jostled 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!