

ELIZABETHAN THEATRE

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Until the mid-16th century, most plays were performed outside London. Craftsmen or tradespeople put on traditional plays in town squares and on village greens. As it grew in size and importance, though, London became the center of English theatre. In Shakespeare's lifetime, theatre became hugely popular. At first it was not considered a very respectable pastime, and most of the theatres were in the rougher parts of town.

The first London theatre was called The Theatre. It was built in 1576 in north London, just outside the City walls. In 1587, the Rose Theatre was built south of the Thames, among the prisons and brothels of an area called Bankside. The Rose flourished and drew large crowds. In 1595, the huge Swan Theatre, said to hold up to 3000 people, was built just a few yards to the west. All these theatres were deliberately built outside the city limits, so they were free from the restrictions of city regulations.

As an aspiring dramatist, Shakespeare could not have been in London at a better time. Not only were people flocking to see plays at the theatre, but Queen Elizabeth I loved the theatre and often held performances of plays at her court.

In London, plays were put on by theatre companies (groups of professional actors). By law, a company had to have a patron, a rich friend who would support it financially. Theatre companies were named after their patrons. For example, the company supported by the Earl of Leicester was Leicester's Men. Shakespeare spent much of his career with a company called the Chamberlain's Men. Its patron was the Lord Chamberlain. As well as performing in theatres, the company gave private shows for students, noblemen, and even the Queen.

In 1603, James I became king. He wanted to be a patron, and started supporting the Chamberlain's Men. From then on, they were known as the King's Men.

Theatre in Elizabethan London was an entertainment for everyone, a bit like the movie theatre today. The cheapest tickets cost one penny, which most ordinary people could afford. (Workers earned a basic wage of about 12 pence a week.) The most expensive tickets were sixpence and were bought by rich merchants and nobles. Foreign traders and tourists often made a trip to the theatres as part of their visit to London. With so many people crowded together, the theatres were also popular with thieves and pickpockets.

Audiences were not as well-behaved as they are today. People jeered at the actors and shouted out rude remarks. Some even climbed onto the stage and joined in with swordfights. People also brought food with them to eat during the performance, or to throw at bad actors.

Special effects and scenery did not play a big part in Elizabethan theatre. Musicians provided sound effects with drums and trumpets, and the actors often wore extravagant, showy costumes. But audiences were expected to use their imaginations for different locations and backgrounds. A speech from HENRY V asks the audience to imagine huge battlefields and armies, as they cannot be reproduced on stage.

Theatres were closed during severe outbreaks of plague, because it was feared that the disease spread more quickly in crowds. Many companies left London for tours of the countryside. Players often had to sell their costumes and scripts in order to survive. Some Puritans, who thought theatre-going was a sin, believed that plague was sent by God as a punishment for such wickedness.

Shakespeare is thought to have joined the theatre as an actor, or "player," and became a writer later. It was normal for actors to help write plays, or to change them a lot during rehearsals. Shakespeare probably started gradually writing more and acting less. Actors often specialized in one type of part. Stars like Richard Burbage and William Sly got the big parts, such as leading roles in tragedies. Comic actors or clown, such as Will Kempe, played a fool or a comic character. There were no actresses. Women's roles were played by boys. Women did not act on stage until the Restoration, after the English Civil War.