
The Elizabethan Age

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,-
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

- *Richard II, William Shakespeare*

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THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

What was going on during this time period?

THE ELIZABETHAN THEATRE

The theatres, the companies, the audiences.

STAGING THE ELIZABETHAN PLAY

How does it differ from modern staging?

Facts About Elizabethan England

- The population rose from 3 to 4 million.
- This increase led to widespread poverty.
- Average life expectancy was 40 years of age.
- Country largely rural, though there is growth in towns and cities.
- The principal industry still largely agricultural with wool as its main export. But industries such as weaving started to take hold.
- Society strongly divided along class lines.
- People had to dress according to their class.
- The colour purple was reserved for royalty.
- The religion was Protestant-Anglican – the Church of England.
- There was a fine if you didn't attend church.
- Only males went to school.
- The school day could run from 6 am to 5 pm.
- The middle class ate a diet of grains and vegetables – meat was a luxury saved for the rich, who surprisingly ate few vegetables.
- There was no sanitation in London – waste was thrown into the streets.
- There were several outbreaks of the plague: 1563, 1578, 1582, 1592, 1593, 1603.
- In 1563 a quarter of London's population was wiped out by the plague.

“...the City of London--a crammed commercial huddle that smells the river. The Thames was everybody's thoroughfare. The Londoners of Chaucer's time had had difficulty bridging it; the Elizabethans had achieved only London Bridge. ‘...Chained to the banks there were sometimes criminals, who had to abide the washing of three tides... The streets were narrow, cobbled, slippery with the slime of refuse. Houses were crammed together, and there were a lot of furtive alleys. Chamber pots, or jordans, were emptied out of windows. There was no drainage...”
~ Shakespeare, Anthony Burgess, 1978.

The Elizabethan Age

The Elizabethan age (named after Elizabeth the First) is one of contradiction and controversy. It is often shown through a romantic lens, this wonderful creative world of many great thinkers and doers: the poet Edmund Spenser, the philosopher Francis Bacon, Francis Drake who circumnavigated the world, and of course it is the era where Shakespeare wrote his masterpieces. The Elizabethan era is commonly referred to as “The Golden Age.”

Just as often, the Elizabethan era is known for the ravages of the poor and the plague, the stinking swill of London streets where violence, torture and public punishment reigned. Not as badly as under Queen “Bloody” Mary but still. There was much upheaval back and forth between the Crown and City Officials, between Protestants and Catholics, to the point that the Pope declared that it was not a sin to assassinate Queen Elizabeth.

A perfect example of the age’s contradictions is in its entertainment. This was an era where people were just as likely to go to the theatre, or watch a bear get mauled to death by dogs. The marriage of violence and theatre is not out of place in the Elizabethan era.

“Read the lives of the poets—Surrey, Wyatt, Sidney, Spenser, Raleigh, Marlowe, Jonson—and of these, only Spenser and Jonson died in their beds, and Ben had killed his man in a duel. The student of Elizabethan history and biography will find stranger contrasts than in the lives of these poets, for crime, meanness, and sexual depravity often appear in the closest juxtaposition with imaginative idealism, intellectual freedom, and moral grandeur.”

~ The Facts About Shakespeare, William Allan Nielson and Ashley Horace Thorndike, 1927

But then again, the whole story of the monarchy leading up to Elizabeth the First’s reign is filled with violence and theatre. It’s an intensely interesting story that has been documented time and time again: her father Henry VIII and his six wives, the beheading of several of those wives, the denouncing of the Catholic Church so he could divorce one to marry another, the joy of Henry finally having a son, the pain of that son dying at such a young age, the roaring of Mary Tudor (Elizabeth’s half sister) to bring Catholicism back and Elizabeth’s cautious playing of both sides, even surviving implication in a rebellion and a stint in the tower of London, to stay alive and be named Mary’s heir.

Elizabeth ruled England from 1558 until her death in 1603. Just as her road to the throne was rife with religious and political upheaval, her reign also encountered instability: the threat of assassination, rebellions, the constant pressure to marry, the need to balance religious factions, political factions, and the theatre.

THAT’S RIGHT. THE THEATRE.

The theatre, particularly secular drama, made amazing leaps and bounds during the Elizabethan age. And although there’s no direct quote from Elizabeth that says she loved the theatre, her actions can certainly lead us to believe so. But wait, what about the proclamations?

The Proclamation of 1559 stated that all performances had to be licensed and plays with religious or political themes were banned as were medieval mystery plays. The Vagabond Act of 1572 meted out severe punishment for actors who were not attached to a company or tried to perform without a license.

“All fencers, bearwards, common players of interludes, and minstrels (not belonging to any baron of this realm, or to any other honourable person of greater degree),” wandering abroad without the license of two justices at the least, were subject” to be grievously whipped and burned through the gristle of the right ear with a hot iron of the compass of an inch about.”

~ Wikipedia, 1911 Encyclopædia Britannica, Theatre

That law put actors in the same category as **rogues** and **vagabonds**.

In 1575 *the Code of Practice Upon the Players* drove the actors out of the London and in 1576 all theatre performances were banned in city.

In 1581 a decree was made that every play had to be performed in front of and approved by the Master of Revels. No play could be performed without his license and he had the right to change or outright ban a play.

While this indeed seems like a lot of anti-theatre activity, we can assume Elizabeth loved or at the very least liked the theatre because there is so much primary evidence that City Officials of London and religious groups hated the theatre and wanted it stamped out.

“Her Majestie being informed that there are verie greate disorders committed in the common playhouses both by lewd matters that are handled on the stages and by resorte and confluence of bad people, hath given direction that not onlie no plaies shalbe used within London or about the citty or in any publique place during this tyme of sommer, but that also those playhouses that are erected and built only for suche purposes shalbe plucked downe.”

~Letter from Mayor of London 1597

Actors were treated with **suspicion** and plays were seen as **immoral**. The idea of large groups of people gathering (and perhaps being influenced by what they saw) was seen as dangerous. Large gatherings were also dangerous in terms of disease, with so many people in one place is it any wonder the plague swept through the population?

If Elizabeth agreed with this line of thinking it would have been easy for her to wipe out all theatre everywhere. Instead, the craft of the theatre grew from ragtag travelling troupes performing in inn-yards to Shakespeare's Hamlet during her reign.

Acting became known as a profession instead of something associated with rogues and vagabonds:

As early as 1574 the patent to Leicester's Men refers to playing as an “arte and facultye.” In 1581 the Privy Council call it a “trade;” in 1582 a “profession;” in 1593 a “quality.” The order of 1600 explicitly recognizes that it “may with a good order and moderation be suffered in a well governed state.”

~ The Elizabethan Stage, E.K. Chambers, Volume 1, Clarendon, 1923.

There was a tug of war between city officials and the Queen regarding the theatre and a lot of compromise.

For example, though theatre was banned from the city, there was no ban on building theatres outside of the walls, which is exactly what began to happen. Though there were tight rules on companies, those companies in the Queen's favour often received special exemptions from those rules. Though actors were treated with suspicion, she had her own company of the best actors pulled together as The Queen's Men who toured the country. She brought in companies to perform plays, and argued against the shutting down of the theatres so that actors could “practice” through their public performances in order to be at their best when they came before her.

And so was built one of the most fascinating eras in theatre history.

The Elizabeth Timeline

I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too.

~ Elizabeth I

THE ELIZABETH TIMELINE

- 1533 - Queen Elizabeth is born.
- 1536 - Her mother Anne Boleyn executed for adultery and treason.
- 1547 - Her father Henry VIII dies, Edward VI becomes King.
- 1553 - Edward VI dies of tuberculosis. Throne is taken over by Elizabeth's half sister Mary. She re-establishes Catholicism as the primary religion.
- 1554 - Elizabeth is implicated in the Wyatt rebellion and placed in the Tower of London. She is released after a few months because of her popularity.
- 1558 - Queen Mary dies, Elizabeth takes the throne at the age of 25. England becomes Protestant again.
- 1562 - Elizabeth contracts small pox, almost dies.
- 1563 - The Black Plague breaks out.
- 1570 - Elizabeth is excommunicated by the Catholic Church. The Pope says it is not a sin to assassinate her.
- 1571 - A marriage negotiation between Elizabeth and the Duke of Anjou falls through.
- 1571 - Ridolfi plot to overthrow Elizabeth and put Mary Queen of Scots on the throne is revealed. Mary denies any knowledge.
- 1581 - There is a marriage negotiation with a second Duke of Anjou and it falls through.
- 1583 - Throgmorton plot - another attempt to kill Elizabeth and put Mary Queen of Scots on the throne.
- 1585 - War is declared with Spain.
- 1586 - Babington plot is revealed against Elizabeth. This time Mary Queen of Scots is directly involved.
- 1587 - Mary Queen of Scots is executed.
- 1588 - The Spanish Armada is defeated.
- 1593 - All London theatres closed because of the Plague.
- 1594 - Start of the Nine Years War in Ireland.
- 1601 - Elizabeth invokes the "poor law" so that parishes provide for their poor.
- 1602 - Earl of Essex tries to lead a revolt against Elizabeth.
- 1603 - Queen Elizabeth dies of blood poisoning.



EXERCISES AND ACTIVITIES

- Do some research on Elizabeth's time in the tower of London. She was twenty-one years old. Though she was popular with the people she was certain she was going to die there. Specifically read about her arrival at the Tower, it is quite dramatic! After your research, write a monologue from Elizabeth's perspective. What are her feelings about being in the tower?
- Now turn the perspective around. Write a monologue from the perspective of a young person seeing the princess in the tower. How do you feel? Are you sympathetic toward her, or glad she's there because your loyalty lies with Queen Mary? What do you hope is the outcome for Elizabeth?
- In groups, focus on a day in the life during Elizabethan England. Choose a specific class group (lower, middle or aristocracy) and through a series of tableaux show their day from sunrise to sunset.
- Divide the class into groups for a debate: City officials, religious leaders, the Queen and her advisers. Research how each group feels about theatre in the city of London and then create a mock-debate on the subject.
- The year is 1572 and the Vagabonds Act has just come out. In groups create a scene in which a group of travelling actors talk about the possibility of getting caught under the Act. Are they afraid? Do they think officials will be lenient? Do any think about leaving acting?
- What people wore was significant to their social standing. Look up what a lower middle class woman might be expected to wear on a daily basis. In groups write a scene as if gossiping about something a woman is wearing out of her class. Feel free to make the dialogue modern and slangy, but keep it specific to Elizabethan rules about clothes and fabrics.
- In groups research a subject of Elizabethan England (food, religion, the lower classes) and prepare an oral presentation that involves an acted out scene based on your subject.

Private Theatres were intimate indoor venues with performances lit by candlelight. They were often long halls in which the audience sat down either side. The Blackfriars was the first of these private theatres and it had two different lives. The space was a converted monastery hall (Henry VIII dissolved all monasteries in 1538) and in 1576 was taken over by Richard Farrant, composer and choirmaster. But Farrant also wanted to stage plays and used the space with children's company Children of the Chapel Royal. The space was closed in 1584 - there is some suggestion that there was a lease argument, or that it was closed due to plays with overly political subject matter. In 1596 James Burbage (the same person who built The Theatre and later The Globe) took over a section of the building and turned it into an indoor performance space. The capacity of the space was approximately 1000 with a ticket price of at least 5 pence (5 times what it cost to go to a public theatre). After 1608, Shakespeare's company performed at Blackfriars during the winter.

Public Theatres were by far the cheaper experience. Entrance into the building was a penny and that allowed you to stand in the yard in front of the stage where the majority of the audience was crowded together, open to the elements. It cost extra to stand in the roofed gallery, extra to sit, and more still if you wanted a cushion or the best seat on the stage itself.

DID YOU KNOW:

Those who stood in front of the stage to watch a performance were called groundlings.

There are only a couple of sketches in existence of Public theatres from this time. The best primary source is this 1596 picture drawn by Dutchman Johannes De Witt while on a trip to London. Public theatres had an open ceiling to let in the light. All performances were held in the afternoon and a flag was raised to let the public know the nature of the play: comedy, tragedy, or history. The shape of the buildings were approximate circles (hexagons) made of wood. Shakespeare makes mention of the "wooden O" shape of the theatre (it would have been The Curtain) in the prologue of Henry V as the Chorus speaks to the audience about bringing the story to life:

But pardon, and gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that have dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object: can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?



Theatres could hold anywhere from 1,500 to 3,000 patrons. There was an audience on three sides (sometimes four if they were willing to pay to sit on the stage). There were a number of playing areas: the stage was raised and the front of the stage, the apron, jutted out into the audience, so many scenes were played within spitting distance of the groundlings. In the floor of the apron there was a trap door. At the back, there was a roofed structure that held the inner stage, an area that could be curtained off, where scenes could be revealed.

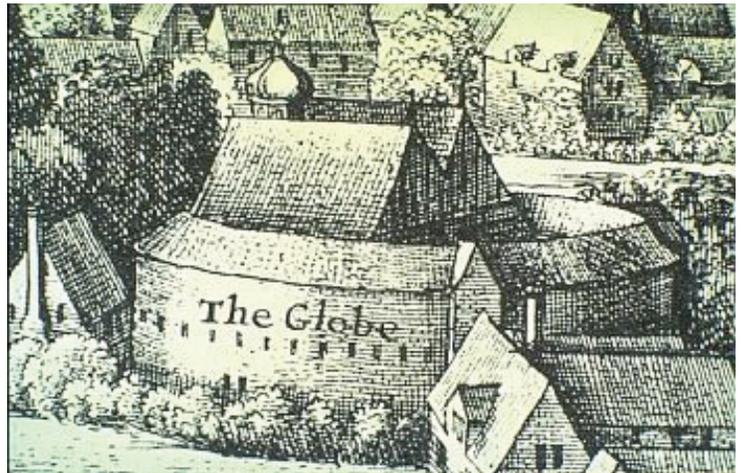
Think of Miranda and Ferdinand being “discovered” playing chess in *The Tempest*. There were also a couple of doors for entrances and exits and a balcony, sometimes called the upper stage. Think of Juliet standing the upper stage as she calls out, “*Oh Romeo, Romeo wherefore art thou Romeo...*” The underside of the roof was painted as a sky and called “the heavens.” There was a trap door here as well so actors could descend down onto the stage. The backstage area of the theatre was called the Tiring House. It had space for the costume and props, dressing rooms for the actors, and administration offices.

NOTABLE PUBLIC THEATRES OF THE ERA

- The Curtain, 1577
- The Rose, 1587
- The Swan, 1595
- The Globe, 1599
- The Fortune, 1600
- The Hope, 1613

THE GLOBE THEATRE

The Globe has a pretty interesting origin story. In 1599 the lease was up for The Theatre and James Burbage could not come to terms with the landowner over a new lease. So in the middle of the night he arranged to have the building taken apart board by board and moved from Shoreditch to Southwark, where it was reassembled as The Globe. The theatre was owned by the shareholders in Shakespeare’s troupe, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. It is the theatre most associated with Shakespeare’s works. In 1613, the theatre burnt down during a production of *Henry VIII* when a cannon shot lit the roof on fire. It was rebuilt, then torn down again in 1644 during Puritan rule. A version of The Globe was rebuilt quite close to its original spot in 1997 and has regular performances.



AUDIENCES

When thinking about how William Shakespeare’s Hamlet would have been performed in the day of its authorship, many people picture a theater whose seats were much less comfortable than the average theater today, an audience more divided by class, but other than that, too many often assume it would have looked much like a modern day performance—the audience watching quietly and intently in a low-light, enclosed space anxiously attentive to the lines pouring from the actors’ mouths. Research shows, however, that this was not the case.

~ Samuel Bowles Shakespeare’s Elizabethan Audience, 2007

It is a common modern misconception that the only people who ever went to a Shakespeare play were the educated. It seems impossible for us to think of Shakespeare's plays as common. But the Elizabethan audience came from all levels of society. It was not just an entertainment for the aristocracy. The theatre was a popular form of entertainment for all classes. Look at how many theatres existed during the era. It stands to reason that there was enough of an audience to sustain them.



The lower classes were on the front lines – they stood right in front of the stage, having the closest vantage point of all. If the groundlings didn't like the play they would have rioted. They enjoyed Hamlet as much as those Earls and Dukes in the third gallery:

“It is a tribute to the Elizabethan age that such a complete, many layered and many-sided play [as Hamlet] should, on its own merits as a piece of entertainment, have become so popular”
 ~ Gary G O'Connor, *William Shakespeare: A Life, Hodder and Stoughton, 1991*

The experience of going to the theatre in the Elizabethan era is not the quiet, polite audience that goes to the theatre today. Food and drink were sold, the audiences were involved and interactive – cheering and booing when appropriate. Liken it more to the audience in a WWE wrestling match than a modern Broadway audience. And don't forget, this is a contradictory and violent age – just as the audience might enjoy Hamlet's “To be or not to be” speech, they also enjoyed bloody sword fights. The bloodier the better. Actors would put pig bladders under their costumes so that they could “spurt blood” when their character was injured.

ACTING COMPANIES

Professional companies solidified themselves once Queen Elizabeth made it illegal for actors to perform without being attached to a company and for companies to be sponsored by anyone less than a Baron. As popular as it was to go to the theatre, acting companies often had a tough go. They often found their theatres closed due to plague (for two years in 1592 and 1593) during their busiest season. Their plays had to be vetted for a fee, by the Master of Revels. They had to fight official objection. They faced competition from the other theatres. They had to make enough money to pay the company members and their expenses – costumes, props, the plays themselves. In order to keep an audience each company had to have a vast number of plays in their repertoire. Which suggests that Shakespeare wasn't necessarily prolific, he was writing what was necessary to help his acting company maintain their audience.

But there was money to be made, because going to the theatre was popular. There wouldn't have been as many theatres as there were if the venture wasn't profitable.

“At least 15,000 attended the two established theatres weekly (The Theatre and the Rose). Daily receipts per theatre averaged between 8.5 (pounds) and 10 sums equal to seven to ten months' labor to an Elizabethan artisan; combined weekly receipts for both theatres reached perhaps 120 (pounds) a sum equal to eight years labor to the artisan and about one-third the annual income of the Gentry.”

~ *Art Imitates Business, James Forse, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993.*

Most acting companies were made up of Shareholders, Actors, Apprentices, and Hired men (musicians, extras, stagehands). All told, there might be 25 members of a company. Everyone in the company would have been male; it was illegal for women to act on the stage. Some companies such as the Lord Chamberlain's Men not only had owners, but artists among the shareholders – both Shakespeare and actor Richard Burbage were shareholders. Those who were shareholders not only shared in the profits, but they also had to share in the expenses. Being a shareholder in The Globe was quite profitable for Shakespeare. He was able to retire to Stratford where he bought the “second” most expensive house.

It is sometimes thought that the Queen was the patron to Shakespeare's company but she wasn't. In 1583 she had her own company (The Queen's Men) which pulled together the best actors. This troupe performed for the Queen but also toured the country. In fact they toured long after their last court appearance in 1594. In the late 1590's two of the most well-known Elizabethan troupes found their feet: The Lord Chamberlain's Men (of which Shakespeare was a member) and the Lord Admiral's Men.

The Lord Admiral's Men whose patron was Lord Howard, were owned by theatrical businessman Philip Henslowe. The troupe performed regularly at The Rose Theatre. The best-known actor of the troupe was Edward Alleyn and best-known playwright was Christopher Marlowe. Later on they fell under the patronage of Prince Henry and became The Prince's Men. Henslowe has provided a great deal of information on what it was like to run an acting company because he kept a diary. Items such as actor salaries, lists of props and costumes, income, all were detailed by Henslowe. Here is a selection of some of the props kept in storage at the Rose Theatre:

- One tomb of Guido, one tomb of Dido, one bedstead.
- Eight lances, one pair of stairs for Phaeton.
- One golden fleece, two rackets, and one bay tree.
- One wooden hatchet, one leather hatchet.
- One lion skin, one bear's skin and Phaeton's limbs and Phaeton's chariot and Argosse' head.
- Neptune fork and garland.
- Jerosses head and rainbow, one little altar.
- One boar's head and Cerberus three heads.
- Two coffins, one bull's head.
- One ghost's crown and one crown with a sun.
- One black dog.

LORD CHAMBERLAIN'S MEN

Though this company had other patrons, the troupe was called the Lord Chamberlain's Men when Shakespeare became a shareholder. When they received the patronage of King James in 1603, they became the King's men. This troupe started out at The Theatre and then mainly performed at The Globe – only leaving the city when plague closed the theatres. They performed most of Shakespeare's plays.

CHILDREN'S COMPANIES

There was another type of acting company in the Elizabethan area and that was boy actor groups. These were mostly made up of young preadolescent boys plucked from choir schools. These companies had a lot of clout. Groups such as The Children of St. Paul and the Children of the Chapel Royal were favoured by the Queen. They performed works by the top playwrights of the time such as Ben Jonson. When James Burbage wanted to turn The Blackfriars into a performance space, he was required to lease some rooms to Children's Companies. Their popularity meant they were often seen as a threat.

ACTIVITIES

- Divide the class into groups, which are now separate acting companies. Each acting company has to come up with a name and a patron, the name of their theatre, a motto, and a company crest. Each acting company must come up with a one minute play to perform before the Master of Revels. Who will be granted a license to perform their play?
- In the same groups, create scenes where the “actors” find out their theatre is going to be closed due to plague. What is their response?
- Have two acting companies square off. Why does one company think they are better than the other? What have they to offer that the other doesn't?
- Sometimes one company would try to steal the play of another, especially if it was really popular. Have one of the acting companies accuse another of stealing. What's the response?
- Create scenes that use modern sports commentary to fit the Elizabethan sport of bear baiting.
- The Children's groups were seen as a threat to the adult companies. In the same groups, have the acting companies complain about the latest play put up by the Children of the Chapel Royal.
- Write a journal entry from the perspective of an audience member seeing one of Shakespeare's plays for the first time. Decide if you are a groundling, or one of the upper class. How does the language in your entry change depending on your class?
- In groups through a series of tableaux create the events that lead to The Theatre being torn down and rebuilt as The Globe. Start with the landlord dispute and end with the Lord Chamberlain's men acting on The Globe stage.
- In groups create a pamphlet handout that details the evils of going to the theatre. Keep the language and the tone rooted in Elizabethan England.

Staging the Elizabethan Play

In no respect, indeed, was realism of setting an important concern of either dramatist or audience; in many cases, evidently, neither of them cared to think of a scene as located in any precise spot.... This nonchalance made for easy transition from one place to another, and the whole simplicity of staging had the important advantage of allowing the audience to center their attention on the play rather than on the accompaniments.

~ Robert Huntington Fletcher, *An Elizabethan Stage, A History of English Literature, 1918*

Although this era has much in common with the structure of modern theatre (stage, set, costume, audience, script) many aspects of putting a play together would differ from how we would do so today.

SETS AND COSTUME

The staging of an Elizabethan play was greatly influenced by the imagination of the audience. The location was suggested through words, be it atop the castle walls at midnight or deep in a magical forest. Costumes were mere suggestions and rarely full on representations of a place or time. Even gender was suggested as women weren't allowed on stage and all female parts were played by young men.

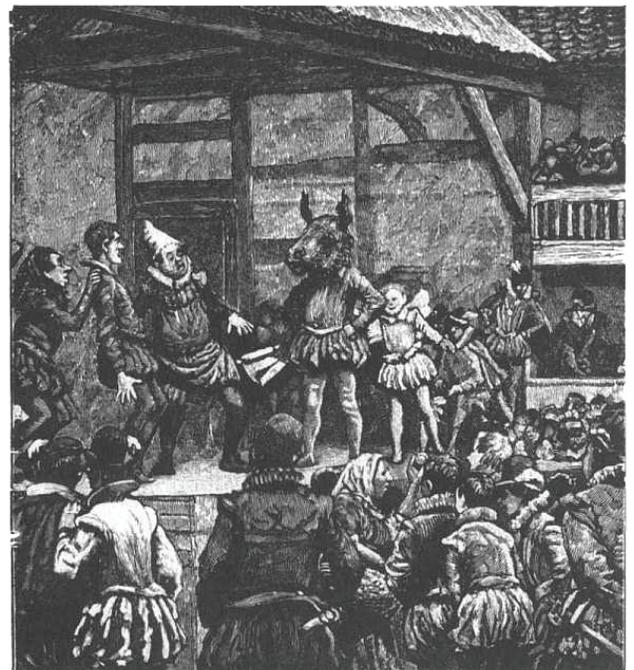
There were little to no sets Elizabethan theatre. The emphasis was on costume and moveable pieces that were in the company's possession. Furniture was often used on the inner stage because it could be curtained off from the audience and revealed.

Actors would pretty much wear Elizabethan modern dress with something added to suggest character and, most important, the class of that character. There were colours and fabrics allowed on stage that the ordinary Elizabethan would have been forbidden to wear such as the colour purple, which was reserved for royalty. There was much ornamentation with the clothing: beads, braids, bright colours, feathers, jewels.

The fact that actors were allowed to "dress up" their everyday wear was not something taken lightly. There were actual laws (Sumptuary laws) that forbade common folk from dressing above their station to keep the classes defined. The laws not only applied to clothing, but food and even furniture. An audience member would know exactly what type of character was entering before they spoke their first line.

BLOCKING

By and large, there were three playing areas on the Elizabethan stage: the **apron front piece**, the **inner stage** and the **balcony**. There were two or three doors at the rear of the stage for entrances and exits. There was no curtain that fully separated the audience from the apron stage action and everything was in full light all the time – no blackouts in this era! So, if there were any furniture pieces that needed to be brought on or off the apron the actors would have to do in full sight of the audience. If any character died on the apron



stage, they would either have to get up and walk off or be dragged off. It's no coincidence that when Hamlet kills Polonius, he drags the body away as it helps the exit of the actor.

Exits and entrances were usually the only thing written in Elizabethan stage directions. And since most plays were not published in the writer's lifetime (as is the case with Shakespeare) any stage directions might have been added by a later editor. For the most part, one would have to guess as to how to stage any given scene. Except Shakespeare was clever. He embedded blocking instructions within the dialogue. Look at this scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for example.

HERMIA: How low am I, thou painted maypole? speak;
How low am I? I am not yet so low

But that my nails can reach unto thine eyes. *(Shakespeare is telling this actor exactly what to do - she's going to attack Helena and try to scratch out her eyes)*

HELENA: I pray you, though you mock me, gentlemen,

Let her not hurt me: I was never curst;

I have no gift at all in shrewishness;

I am a right maid for my cowardice:

Let her not strike me. You perhaps may think, *(she's asking Lysander and Demetrius to physically hold Helena back)*

Because she is something lower than myself,

That I can match her.

One of the oddest stage directions in Shakespeare occurs in *The Winter's Tale*. Act III scene iii has "exit pursued by a bear" in which Antigonus runs offstage, with a bear in pursuit and meets his end.

ACTORS

Being an actor was not a respected profession in the Elizabethan era but for a few it was an amazing time. Imagine being the first to perform *Richard III*, *Juliet*, or *Hamlet*! To be an actor in this era was not an easy job for the lazy – there were always more characters than actors so actors had to play multiple parts. And the same play was never performed twice in a row – so in a week actors would have to have memorized their roles for six different plays. Also, actors would never receive a full script. They would only have their lines and their cue lines (aka sides) which means they'd have to be listening intently every performance.

Not only that, many of them would have to be proficient in singing, dance, stage combat and swordplay, of which they would probably have to choreograph the swordfights themselves. There isn't much indication that there were directors or stage managers (as we think of the terms) in the Elizabethan era.

WELL-KNOWN ACTORS

Richard Burbage – 1571-1619

Member of the Lord Chamberlain's company. Son of theatre entrepreneur James Burbage, he along with his brother inherited Blackfriars and the Globe Theatre. A well-known actor of his time and in great demand but most significantly as the first actor of the major Shakespearean roles: *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Lear*. He was mentioned in Shakespeare's will and acted until his death.



Edward Alleyn – 1566-1626

A contemporary and sometimes rival to Burbage. A member of The Admiral's Men. He premiered some of Marlowe's works: Tamburlaine, Faustus, and The Jew of Malta. He married the stepdaughter of his boss, Phillip Henslowe, at The Rose Theatre. The two built the Fortune Theatre.

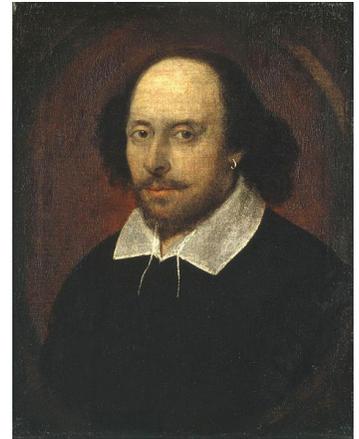


Will Kemp: 1560-1603

Known as a comic actor and a dancer. Member of the Lord Chamberlain's company. He was a shareholder but only for a short time as he left the company in 1599. He never performed at the Globe with the company. Played Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

William Shakespeare: 1564-1616

There is even evidence that Shakespeare started his career in London as an actor. It is thought that he played the Ghost in *Hamlet* and is mentioned in a 1598 production of a Ben Jonson play.



ACTIVITIES

- Write a journal entry from the perspective of an actor. What Shakespeare roles do you play? What is it like to have to prepare so many at a time?
- Create a blog for an Elizabethan actor.
- Write a journal entry from the perspective of a woman of the time who wants to be an actor.
- Take a modern scene and cut it up so that actors only receive their lines and their cue line. Then have them read through the scene. Discuss what the experience is like to act that way. What did it feel like to have to listen for lines? Try the same exercise with a Shakespeare scene as they would have done in the Elizabethan era.
- Read and discuss **Hamlet's advice to the players** (see next page) in which he tells the troupe of actors how to perform. Go through the speech and make sure everyone understands it. Divide the speech into sections. Have groups create tableaux for each section. What does this speech suggest about acting during the Elizabethan era? Have the groups turn the speech into a modern one – if they were going to give modern actors acting advice, what would it be?
- Do research on Richard Burbage and Edward Alleyn. Create a Facebook status war between the two actors. What would they say about each other? How would they write a status to make themselves look good? How would they make the other jealous?

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Speech to the Players, Act 3 scene ii

HAMLET: Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as *liefe* the town crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, by use all gently, for in the very *torrent*, tempest, and (as I may say) whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and *beget* a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious *periwig-pated* fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the *groundlings*, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for *o'erdoing Termagant*. It out-herods Herod. Pray you avoid it. Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you *o'erstep* not the modesty of nature. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve, the *censure* of the which one must in your allowance *o'erweigh* a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly (not to speak profanely), that neither having th' accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of Nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably. Reform it altogether! And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them, for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That's villainous and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it. Go make you ready.