

The Globe Theatre

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Text of lecture

I like to say that Shakespeare is Hollywood's most successful screenwriter, and after several *Hamlets*, *Ten Things I Hate about You*, and *Shakespeare in Love*, a lot of people would agree. You can perform Shakespeare in almost any kind of theater: a regular proscenium arch theatre, a theatre in the round, a black box theatre, in the open air, and even in the street. Shakespeare plays have been set in the past, in the present, in the future, and on the moon.

But the plays were written in a specific time and place, and to be presented in a certain kind of theater. To understand that theater—the Globe—is to understand the tools Shakespeare was working with, how the plays might have been presented, and how to understand them better. So let me give you a guided tour of Shakespeare's Globe.

First, theaters aren't just built and then filled by actors. Actors or producers put on plays in any available building, and when they can afford to, they build a theatre to fit their needs. So I want you to imagine that you're an actor in the 1550s, before the first English public theatres were built.

If you were an actor, you would be wandering from town to town, putting on shows wherever you could. And the two places you would most likely put on a show would be a Lord's Hall or an innyard. Let's leave aside the Lord's Hall for the moment, which the smaller indoor theatres were modeled on, and stick with the innyard. Why was an innyard such a great place to do a show?

An inn is a terrific place for a show because of the crowds it attracts, the cooperation of the landlord, the easy availability of snacks and refreshments, and most importantly, the ability to make sure your audience paid up.

Innkeepers loved for players to do shows, and at a time when actors weren't popular with everybody, that was important. They attracted big crowds who would buy a lot of beer.

An inn was the perfect shape. It was usually a big open circle or square, with the yard in the middle and the building running all around, up maybe two or three stories. The actors only had to drive their cart right in, roll some barrels together, put some boards over the barrels for a stage and hang a cloth behind the stage to dress behind, and they were in business. And they could station someone at the entrance to make sure that everybody coming in paid.

So when theater became popular in London, and people began building the first purpose-built theatres (like the Theatre in 1576), actors thought back to what they were used to:

An open round or square building

Two or three stories, so people could sit up high, protected by the weather

A big open yard

Places for money gatherers to collect admissions

A high stage, about barrel height (five feet up), with a wooden plank floor

A place in back for props to be hidden and for actors to dress

And what you wind up with is something that looks like the Globe.

Of course, that's only the basic outlines. It didn't take long for actors to import useful technology and embellishments from other sources.

From the medieval mystery and morality plays, they developed the concept of the spaces underneath and above the stage. In medieval plays, these were known as "hell" and "the heavens." Devils popped up from under the stage and angels were lowered from above, and the Renaissance theatre kept the idea. So when the Ghost of Hamlet's father disappears, Hamlet refers to his presence under the stage:

Ghost cries under the stage.

Ghost. Swear.

Ham. Ha, ha, boy, say'st thou so? Art thou there, truepenny?
Come on, you her this fellow in the cellarage.

(Hamlet, I.v.149-51)

. Shakespeare also had gods lowered from above, even in late plays like *Cymbeline*. The winch and rope used for the lowering made a creaking sound, and since other playwrights like Ben Jonson thought the technique was old-fashioned, this is probably where we get our term "a creaky device."

Flying high above the theatre was a flag with the theatre's device. Some people think there were different colored flag, depending on whether the play to be performed was a tragedy, a history, or a comedy. The device usually symbolized the theatre, and the flag for the Globe showed Atlas holding up the world, or the Globe. Underneath the sign outside with the same device there was written "Totus mundus agit histrionem," –Latin for "all the world plays the player," or as Jacques says in *As You Like It*, "All the world's a stage."

Holding up the heavens and a small roof over the stage were two big pillars made of oak. This is so unlike a modern theatre that if it weren't for a small drawing made by a Dutch tourist for the folks back home, scholars would probably never have guessed that such a thing existed. The big pillars shown in the DeWitt drawing look as though they would be in the way. Actually, they were very useful; they held up the roof, vital for protecting expensive costumes in the days before dry cleaning, they acted as a sounding board to help project the actors' voices, and they probably stood for trees, walls, and whatever else was needed for the plot.

Before they had a permanent theatre, actors probably had to make do with a makeshift space behind some curtains to dress and wait for cues. Now that they had their own building, this space developed into the elaborate tiring-house. It had two doors, both in the back of the stage, with a curtained space in between; two or three levels, including a balcony, and elaborate decoration. It's easy to see that Shakespeare had this kind of space in mind when he wrote his plays. *Romeo and Juliet* wouldn't be *Romeo and Juliet* without the balcony scene. And the curtained space behind the stage is perfect for Polonius to hide behind—and for Hamlet to stab him through.

It's easy to assume that the Early Modern theatre was quaint and old-fashioned, and that they didn't make much use of technology, but that wouldn't be correct. There were all sorts of special devices and effects, built into the theatre itself and added by clever technicians.

In the stage itself were several trapdoors. Actors dressed as devils popped up, actors going to hell or caught in some fiendish plot suddenly dropped down. A big double trapdoor could be left open for a grave, and in *Hamlet* the grave trap is very busy. Gravediggers make it bigger, skulls are tossed up out of it, Ophelia's body is lowered into it, and finally Hamlet and Laertes have a wrestling match in it.

Back behind the tiring house curtains waited the bookkeeper, who kept track of the play as it progressed, and several hired men. By them were stacked the tools of the trade—firecrackers, sound-making devices, daggers, swords and other death-dealing instruments, various props, like crowns and lion skins, and of course stage blood and guts, as realistic looking as possible

On a slightly nicer note, musicians were stationed up in the balcony.

Up above the heavens, some more hired men waited, mostly to produce sound effects. They rolled cannon balls down long wooden troughs to simulate thunder and also shot off cannon, either above the stage or in back of the theatre, when the script called for it. In 1613, the owners of the Globe had reason to be sorry for this particular device—some wadding from the cannon lodged in the roof, set fire to the thatch, and burnt the theatre to the ground. When they rebuilt it, they remembered to put a tile roof on instead—more expensive, but fireproof.

When people interested in reconstructing the Globe first began to imagine the building, they decided it must have been white and brown, like the outside of so many buildings of the time. They forgot about the descriptions people had actually written! No one wants to sit in a boring-looking theatre, then or now, and Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres actually had wild paint jobs. The inside glittered with reds and blues and even gold. Sometimes they painted the wood to look just like marble, so realistic that some playgoers had to get right up next to it before they realized it was only wood. The curtain behind the stage was elaborately embroidered and all sorts of figures, nymphs and satyrs, were carved into the wood. On the underside of the stage roof, there was a painted sky with the sun, the moon and the Zodiac. It was divided up into squares by golden borders forming a sort of checkerboard, as many ceilings in Renaissance palaces and churches were. So when Hamlet refers to the heavens, he calls it “that most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’er hanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire,” (*Hamlet*, II.ii.299-301) and the audience can see that he’s referring to the stage roof. And when Petruchio and Kate in Act Four of *The Taming of the Shrew* argue about whether or not it’s the sun or the moon that is shining, the audience can see that it’s daytime, but onstage, both the sun and the moon are out. They could both be right!

There’s so much to say about the theatre of Shakespeare’s time; so many books have been written about it and there’s still so much we don’t know. If you want to know more, you might like to look at the notes, suggested readings, and web links attached to this page. But at the very least, hopefully you have a better

image of the theatre Shakespeare and his contemporaries worked in; spare but colorful, an actor's theatre, an acoustic marvel, and the perfect instrument for Shakespeare's plays.



Suggested readings

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Visual images :

The Globe Theatre, London; The Royal Library, Stockholm; The Guildhall Library, London; and the Rijksuniversiteit, Utrecht.