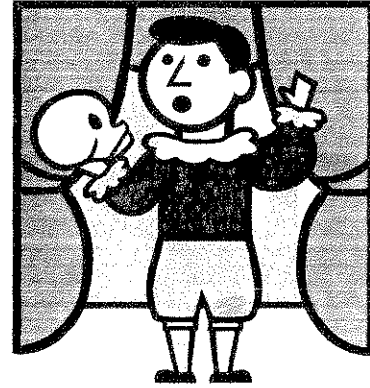


Elizabethan Theatre Audiences

What a treat the theater was for the people of Elizabethan London. Histories, Tragedies and Comedies written by the greatest playwright of them all - William Shakespeare. The popularity of the theater reached people from all walks of life - from Royalty to the Nobility and the Commoners.

What was a day out at the Elizabethan theater like for the audiences? Where did they sit? How much did it cost?

What did they eat? What were the amenities like? How did illiterate members of the public know what plays were being presented?



- London Theatregoers - The London play goers loved the Theatre! It was their opportunity to see the great plays and each other!
 - Elizabethan Audience Capacity - the theatres could hold 1500 people and this number expanded to 3000 with the people who crowded outside the theatres
 - The Nobles - Nobles would have paid for the better seats in the Lord's rooms paying 5d for the privilege
 - The Commoners called the Groundlings or Stinkards would have stood in the theatre pit and paid 1d entrance fee. They put 1 penny in a box at the theatre entrance - hence the term 'Box Office'
 - The Box Office - the prices were determined by the comfort of the seats
 - Special effects were also a spectacular addition at the Elizabethan theaters thrilling the audiences with smoke effects, the firing of a real canon, fireworks (for dramatic battle scenes) and spectacular 'flying' entrances from the rigging in the 'heavens'.
 - The Facilities (bathrooms, etc.) ranged from basic to non existent!
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- The audiences commonly talked throughout the performances, despite pleas from playwrights for silence. If a gallant was sitting on-stage talking it would be very difficult for the audience to hear what was being said by the actors.
 - The audience might well applaud, but they booed and hissed as well if they felt like it and hurled things at the actors when they disapproved of them.
 - Food and drink were served during the performance as yet another distraction. One of the things actors complained most about was the cracking of nuts, which caused quite a lot of noise and disturbance.
 - Because conversations were going on and food and drink were being consumed, the audience were obviously not always attending to what was happening on-stage. The power of an actor would be shown by his ability to command the attention of the audience.
 - It has been estimated that about 20 to 25 per cent of the population attended the playhouses, which again is a far higher percentage than today.

TABLE

Elizabethan Acting Troupes

The Elizabethan Theatre - Elizabethan Acting Troupes

The popularity of the Elizabethan Theatre led to the formation of Elizabethan Acting Troupes. The Elizabethan enjoyed entertainment and loved plays and the theatre. But the first theatre in England was not built until 1576! Before this time actors traveled from one town to another and one castle to another. Travel was difficult in the Elizabethan era. There were frequent outbreaks of the terrifying Bubonic Plague during this time. All strangers were viewed with suspicion. Actors had the reputation of being rogues and vagabonds! A license, obtained from the Bailiff in the Guild Hall, was required by anyone who wanted to travel around England. This ensured that the spread of disease, especially the plague, was contained as much as possible and that the poor, homeless, vagabonds and thieves did not easily move from one village to another village.

Elizabethan Acting Troupes - Licenses

Licenses were granted to the aristocracy for the maintenance of troupes of players, who might at any time be required to show their credentials. Thus the Elizabethan Acting Troupes were formed. The movement of actors was therefore regulated. The major Elizabethan Acting Troupes were as follows:

- Elizabethan Acting Troupes
 - Lord Strange's Men
 - Chamberlain's Men
 - Admiral's Men
 - King's Men

Elizabethan Acting Troupes - The Sumptuary Laws (Clothing restrictions)

Elizabethans were prohibited by Law to wear any clothing which was above their social standing - these were called the Sumptuary Laws. Many Elizabethan plays were about Kings and the nobility but actors were restricted to wear any clothes which might convey this high status! This would have obviously severely restricted and spoiled the performance of plays! The Queen herself enjoyed this form of entertainment so a 'Get out Clause' was written into the Sumptuary Laws! The English Sumptuary Law of 1574 (The Statutes of Apparel) stated the following:

" Note also that the meaning of this order is not to prohibit a servant from wearing any cognizance of his master, or henchmen, heralds, pursuivants at arms; runners at jousts, tourneys, or such martial feats, and such as wear apparel given them by the Queen, and such as shall have license from the Queen for the same."

This was another reason for the formation of the Elizabethan Acting troupes who were sponsored by the nobility!

Earl of Leicester's Men Elizabethan Acting Troupe

The Earl of Leicester's Men were the earliest organized Elizabethan acting company. Formed in 1572 from members of the Earl of Leicester's household, the troupe performed at court the following year. The Earl of Leicester was a favourite of Queen Elizabeth and the company was granted a license by royal patent. In 1576 James Burbage, a member of the troupe, built The Theatre to stage their productions. With the death of the Earl of Leicester in 1588, the troupe merged with Lord Strange's Men.

Lord Strange's Men Elizabethan Acting Troupe

The troupe of Lord Strange was made up from members of the household of Lord Strange, they toured the provinces before appearing at court in 1582. From 1588 to 1594 they were associated with the Admiral's Men. The troupe performed at The Theatre and at the Rose Theatre, where they are believed to have staged several of Shakespeare's plays. Upon the death of Lord Strange in 1594, the group left London to perform in the provinces. Some members, however, joined the Chamberlain's Men.

Chamberlain's Men leading to the King's Men Elizabethan Acting troupe

Chamberlain's Men were the most important company of players in Elizabethan England. Between 1564 and 1567 this acting troupe was initially known as known as Hunsdon's Men, whose patron was Henry Carey, first Lord Hunsdon. Hunsdon took office as Lord Chamberlain in 1585, and another company (the Lord Chamberlain's Men) under his patronage is traceable to 1590. After their patron's death in 1596, the company came under the protection of his son, George Carey, 2nd Lord Hunsdon. Once more it was known as Hunsdon's Men, until their new patron himself took office as Lord Chamberlain in 1597. It was again known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, until the accession of James I in March 1603, when, by letters patent, it was taken under royal patronage and henceforth known as the King's Men.

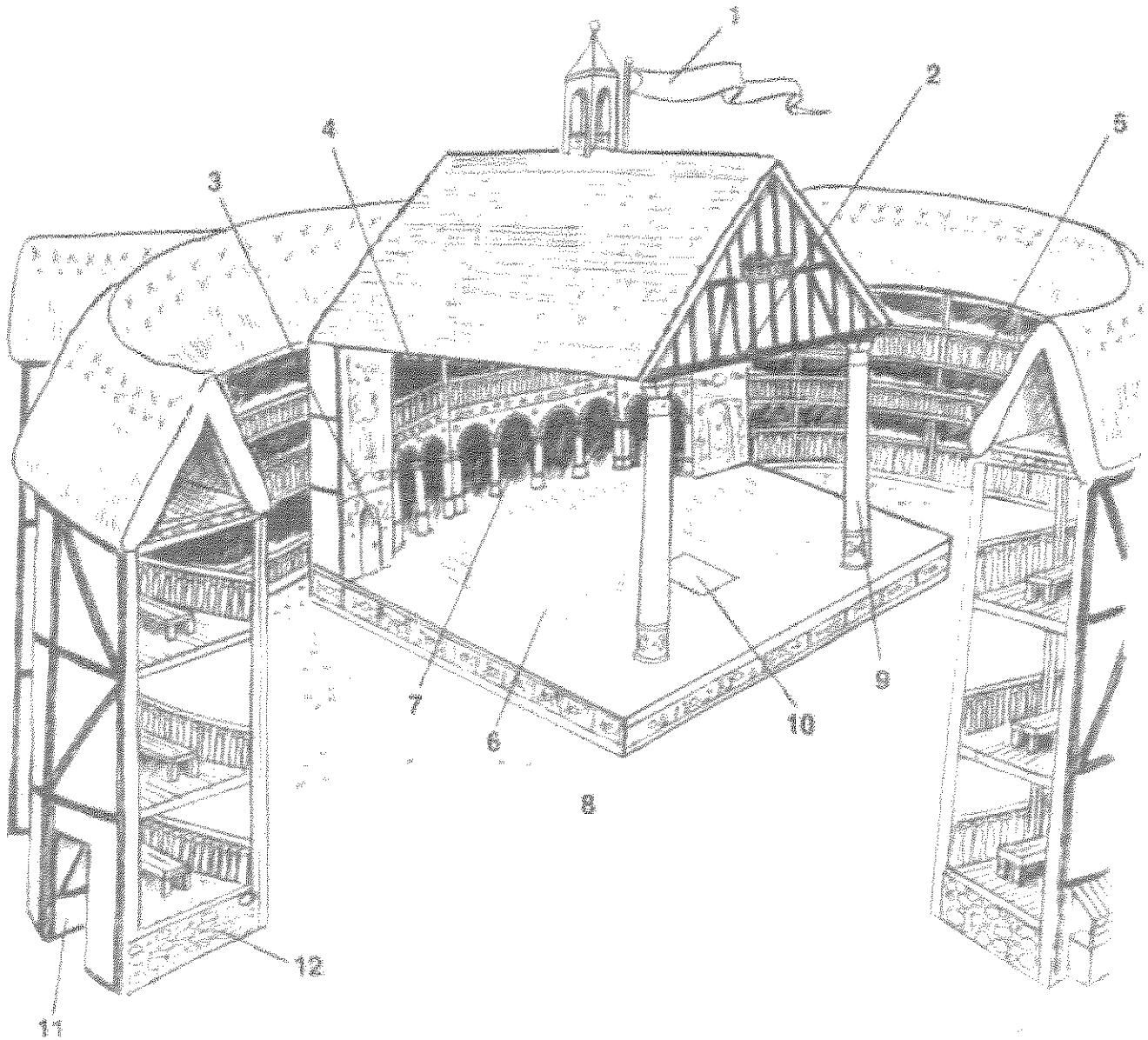
Admiral's Men Acting Troupe

Between 1576 and 1579 they were known as Lord Howard's Men after their patron Charles Howard, 1st Earl of Nottingham, 2nd Baron Howard of Effingham. In 1585, when Lord Howard became England's Lord High Admiral, the company changed its name to the Admiral's Men. The chief actor of the Admiral's Men was Edward Alleyn; their manager and effectively their employer until his death in 1616 was Philip Henslowe whose diary, covering the years 1592 to 1603, documents the Elizabethan theatre and its organization. Once considered the finest Elizabethan theatrical company, the Admiral's Men began to decline with the rise of the Chamberlain's Men and the subsequent retirement of Alleyn in 1603. By 1631 the company had disbanded.

1. **Flag**—signified which type of play was being performed—black for tragedy, white for comedy, and red for history. The flag was flown high enough so most of London could see it waving from the top of the Globe. This was important because the theatre was located on the outskirts of the city across the Thames River.
2. **The "Heavens"**—ceiling over the stage that protected the actors from too much sun or rain. It also represented the sky and heavens and was painted blue with golden stars. Actors who played angels or spirits descended from the hut on top of this "roof" to the main stage. The hut was also used for storage and additional sound effects such as alarm bells, cannon fire, and thunder.
3. **Tiring House**—dressing and storage rooms. Actors rested here between scenes and changed into lavish costumes. All large props were stored here. The doors to the tiring house also served as actors' main entrances and exits.
4. **Upper Stage**—this "chamber" was used for most bedroom and balcony scenes.
5. **Galleries**—three covered seating sections. Audiences paid more to sit on these tiered wooden benches under a thatched roof to keep out the sun and rain. For an additional penny, a patron could borrow a cushion to sit on.
6. **Main Stage**—where the main action of the play took place, especially outdoor scenes of battlefields, forests, or cityscapes. It was often called an "apron" stage because audiences could sit around all three sides. The stage was intentionally built four to five feet high so the audience could not jump up and into the action. For a larger fee, patrons could sometimes sit up on the stage next to the actors.
7. **Inner Stage**—this stage was used mostly for indoor scenes. It had a curtain that could be opened or closed for scene changes.
8. **Open Yard**—audiences paid one penny to stand here and watch the performance, rain or shine. Often these patrons, or groundlings, would participate in the play by cheering, shouting, or throwing snacks at the actors.
9. **Support Pillars**—these wooden pillars supported the roof and were painted to look like marble. Actors used these pillars to hide on the main stage and observe other characters while speaking in "asides" to the audience.
10. **Trap Door**—actors playing ghosts or witches could rise or descend through this door built into the main stage. The cellarage underneath was referred to as "hell."
11. **Entrance**—"gatherers" stood at the single entrance to collect one penny from each patron per performance. Patrons put their pennies into a box, hence the term "box office." It took audiences at least half an hour to file into the theatre.
12. **Brick Foundation**—the Globe's foundation needed to be constructed of brick, as it was built on wet, marshy land close to the Thames River.

The Globe Theatre

In 1599, the famous Globe Theatre was built. Referred to by Shakespeare as a "wooden O," the Globe could hold up to 3,000 spectators, and had as many as 20 sides. Using the Glossary of Terms, examine this unique theatre with its tiered stages, hidden doors, and unusual construction. The Globe Theatre burned down during a production of *Henry VIII* in 1613; reconstruction began that same year. In 1664, the Globe was finally torn down.



The Globe Theatre

In 1599, the famous Globe Theatre was built. Referred to by Shakespeare as a "wooden O," the Globe had as many as 20 sides to give it a circular appearance. The theatre also had three levels, a variety of stages, and could hold up to 3,000 spectators. Shakespeare not only wrote plays for this theatre, he also acted upon its stage and helped pay for its construction.

Flag—Signified which type of play was being performed—black for tragedy, white for comedy, and red for history.

Upper Stage—This "chamber" was used for most bedroom and balcony scenes. The balcony above was used for musicians and sound effects.

Tiring House—Dressing and storage rooms. Actors rested here between scenes and changed into lavish costumes, which made up for the lack of props and scenery. The doors to the tiring house also served as actors' main entrances and exits.

Main Stage—Where main action of the play took place, especially outdoor scenes of battlefields, forests, or cityscapes.

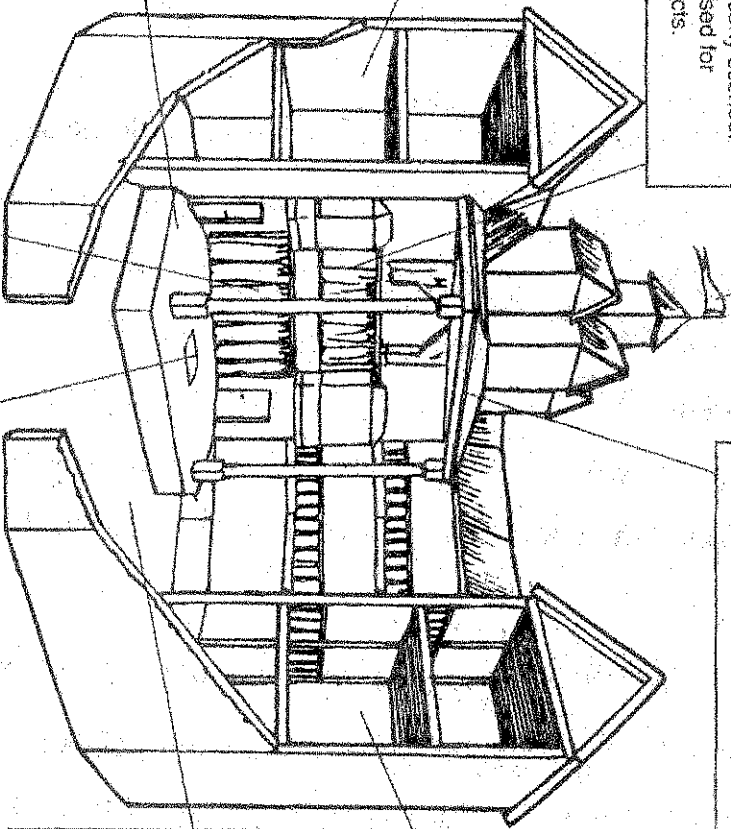
Inner Stage—This stage was used mostly for indoor scenes. It had a curtain that could be opened or closed for scene changes.

The "Heavens"—Consisted of a canopy supported by pillars and a hut on top. The canopy shaded and protected actors from too much sun or rain. It also represented the sky and heavens and was painted with golden stars. The hut above was used for storage and additional sound effects such as alarm bells, cannon fire, and thunder.

Galleries—Three seating sections. Audiences paid more to sit on these tiered wooden benches under a thatched roof, which kept out rain.

Open Yard—Audiences paid one penny to stand here and watch the performance, rain or shine. Often these patrons, called "groundlings," would participate in the action of the play by throwing snacks and shouting at the performers.

Trapdoor—Actors playing ghosts or witches could rise or descend through this door built into the main stage. The cellarage underneath was referred to as "hell."





Boy actors

In Shakespeare's time, girls and women were not allowed to act on stage. All the female parts therefore had to be played by boys. Indeed, in Elizabethan and Jacobean times there were troupes of boy actors who played every part in a dramatic performance.

The boy trainees would, of course, eventually be able to play men's parts but during their apprenticeship, while they were young and when their voices hadn't broken, they played female parts. They often entered the profession between the ages of ten and thirteen, some of them continuing to play women's parts until they were in their late teens or early twenties.

There may be some questions you would like to ask about these boy actors. You may have wondered some of the following questions:

1. **Person "A" ask:** How would young teenage actors be able to play parts of mature women like Cleopatra?

Summarize "B's" response:

2. Write "B's" question:

Person "A" respond: They must have been generally effective because most of the plays were successful and Elizabethan audiences were much less polite and accommodating than our own, so they would soon have made their displeasure felt. There is a possibility that the acting might have been ineffective, however, the audiences would have shown their disapproval.

3. **Person "A" ask:** What sort of physical contact would there be between the boy playing a woman and the man with whom she was engaged in a love scene?

Summarize "B's" response:

4. Write "B's" question:

Person "A" respond: The attitudes of the Elizabethans varied enormously. The puritans disapproved of everything to do with plays and acting. They claimed that all sorts of unlawful heterosexual relationships were carried on by the players, encouraged by the words of the plays. Oddly they don't seem to have worried about the possibility of homosexual relationships, which would seem to have been a much more likely result of men watching boys play female parts. The playgoers themselves were quite at ease with seeing boys play female parts. Of course, it's worth remembering that since the Puritans didn't actually go to see the plays themselves, they didn't know the truth of the situation anyway.

5. **Person "A" ask:** Did the lack of realism of having a boy play a female part matter?

Summarize "B's" response:



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There may be some questions you would like to ask about these boy actors. You may have wondered some of the following questions:

1. Write "A's" question:

Person "B" respond: Nobody really knows the answer to this question, because there is very little written evidence about which boy actors played which parts. Cleopatra, with her 'infinite variety', would have been an incredibly difficult part to play and it seems likely that the play was not very successful when it was first written. We don't know the details, but it is at least possible that the play was not very successful because there wasn't a boy who could play the role effectively. It's also possible, however, that the more mature female parts were played by either older boys or less masculine-looking men.

2. **Person "B" ask:** How effective would they be? Would the audience be convinced?

Summarize "A's" response:

3. Write "A's" question:

Person "B" respond: There would only be formal physical contact between actors such as Romeo and Juliet. Remember that in the most famous love scene in Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet are separated by one of them being on the balcony while the other is on the ground! In many cases the contact would be no more than the touching or kissing of a hand.

4. **Person "B" ask:** What was the attitude of the Elizabethans towards boy actors?

Summarize "A's" response:

5. Write "A's" question:

Person "B" respond: Not really, because the Elizabethan stage was unrealistic anyway. They didn't have scenery or complex sound effects to suggest realistically what they were describing. They didn't separate themselves from the audience by curtains. Since their audiences didn't expect realism in these ways, they could cope well with unrealistic boy actors. The power of Shakespeare was in the words.