RENAISSANCE/ELIZABETHAN THEATER/DRAMA

Terminology

- “English Renaissance theatre/drama” is English drama written between the Reformation (early 1500s) and the closure of the theatres in 1642
- It may also be called “early modern English theatre/drama” or (inaccurately) “Elizabethan theatre/drama”
- Strictly speaking, Elizabethan theatre covers only the plays written and performed publicly in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603)
- It is distinguished from “Jacobean theatre/drama,” associated with the reign of King James I (1603-1625) and “Caroline theatre/drama,” associated with King Charles I (1625-1642—not 1649)

History

English Renaissance theatre derived from several sources:

1. Mystery Plays—religious festivals in England and other parts of Europe during the Middle Ages

- Mystery plays were retellings of legends based on biblical themes or accounts
- Old Testament episodes included the Fall of Lucifer, the Creation and Fall of Man, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, Abraham and Isaac, Moses, etc.
- New Testament episodes included the Nativity, Christ’s Baptism, the Temptation in the Wilderness, the Raising of Lazarus, the Passion, the Resurrection, etc.
- Originally performed in churches but later became linked to secular celebrations that evolved around religious festivals

2. Morality Plays—evolved out of mystery plays; designed to teach consequences of actions

- The best example: *Everyman*, in which an allegorical figure of every man is summoned by the allegorical figure of death to journey to God to account for the life he has been lent. He discovers that his friends Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, Goods, and Knowledge will not go with him. It is Good Deeds (or Virtue), whom he previously neglected, who finally supports him and who offers to justify him before the throne of God.
3. “University drama”—attempted to recreate Greek tragedy

4. *Commedia dell’arte*—Italian: “comedy of artists” or “comedy of humors,” a popular form of improvised theater

- Traveling teams of players would set up an outdoor stage and provide amusement in the form of juggling, acrobatics, dancing and humorous semi-improvised plays based on a repertoire of established characters and storylines
5. **Masque**—involved music and dancing, singing and acting, within an elaborate stage design

- “Proto-ballet”
- Architectural framing and costumes might be designed by a renowned architect, to present a deferential allegory flattering to the patron
- Professional actors and musicians were hired for the speech and song aspects

**Companies**

- Temporary companies of players, attached to households of leading noblemen, performed seasonally in various locations before the reign of Elizabeth I
- They became the foundation for the professional players that performed on the Elizabethan stage
- Tours gradually replaced mystery and morality plays by local players
- In 1572 a law eliminated remaining companies lacking formal patronage by labeling them “vagabonds”
- At court, performance of masques by courtiers and other amateurs, apparently common in the early years of Elizabeth, was replaced by professional companies with noble patrons, who grew in number and quality during her reign
- London authorities (known as the Corporation of London) were generally hostile to public performances, but its hostility was outmatched by the Queen’s taste for plays
- Theatres sprang up in suburbs, especially in Southwark, accessible across the Thames to city dwellers, but not controlled by the Corporation of London
- The companies maintained the pretence that their public performances were mere rehearsals for the frequent performances before the Queen; while the latter did grant prestige, the former were the real source of the income professional players required

**Architecture & Performances**

- The first purpose-built theatre for plays in England (since Roman times anyway) was “The Theater,” built by James Burbage in 1576
- By 1600, there were several theatres, each with an upper level which could be used as a balcony
- Four main areas: main stage, gallery, tiring house, and auditorium
- The stage was essentially a platform surrounded on three sides by the audience, only the rear being open for entrances, exits, and seating for musicians to accompany frequent songs
- One distinctive feature of the companies was that they included only males; until the reign of Charles II, female parts were played by adolescent boy players in women’s costume
Guy as gal

Writers
Although most of the plays written for the Elizabethan stage have been lost, over 600 remain extant.

The men (no woman, so far as is known, wrote for the stage in this era) who wrote these plays were primarily self-made men from modest backgrounds.

Some writers were educated at either Oxford or Cambridge, but many were not.

Although Shakespeare was an actor, the majority do not seem to have been performers, and no major author who came on to the scene after 1600 is known to have supplemented his income by acting.

Not all of the playwrights fit modern images of poets or intellectuals: Marlowe was killed in an apparent tavern brawl, while Jonson killed an actor in a duel.

Payday

- Playwriting was a lucrative occupation for a writer who would produce around two plays per year.
- Most professional playwrights earned an average of £25/year, an impressive amount at the time.
- They would normally be paid in increments during the writing process, and if their play was accepted, they would also receive the proceeds from one day’s performance.
- However, they had no ownership of the plays they wrote; once a play was sold to a company, the company owned it, and the playwright had no control over casting, performance, revision or publication.

Backlash
The rising Puritan movement was hostile to the theatres, which the Puritans considered to be sinful for several reasons
- The most commonly cited reason was that young men dressed up in female costume to play female roles
- Theatres were located in the same parts of the city in which brothels and other forms of vice proliferated
- Plague outbreak was another concern
- When the Puritan faction of Parliament gained control over the city of London at the beginning of the English Civil War, it ordered the closing of all theatres in 1642—though this was largely because the stage was being used to promote opposing political views
- After the monarchy was restored (1660) the theatres re-opened

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The Globe Theater
This sketch is perhaps one of the most important in theatrical history. In 1596, a Dutch student by the name of Johannes de Witt attended a play in London at the Swan Theatre. While there, de Witt made a drawing of the theatre’s interior. A friend, Arend van Buchell, copied this drawing — van Buchell’s copy is the sketch rendered here — and in doing so contributed greatly to posterity. The sketch is the only surviving contemporary rendering of the interior of an Elizabethan-era public theatre. As such, it’s the closest thing historians have to an original picture of what the Globe may have looked like.

- Shakespeare’s company erected the Globe Theatre circa 1598 in London’s Bankside district
- It was one of four major theatres in the area, along with the Swan and the Rose
The open-air, octagonal amphitheater rose three stories high with a diameter of approximately 100 feet, holding a seating capacity of up to 3,000 spectators.
• The rectangular stage platform on which the plays were performed was nearly 43 feet wide and 28 feet deep
• This staging area probably housed trap doors in its flooring and primitive rigging overhead for various stage effects
Adams Theater in Cedar City, UT

Adams interior
Richard Burbage

The Globe’s Construction

- The Lord Chamberlain’s Men had been performing in The Theatre, built by James Burbage (the father of Richard Burbage) in 1576
- In 1597, although the company technically owned The Theatre, their lease on the land on which it stood expired
- Their landlord, Giles Allen, desired to tear The Theatre down
- This led the company to purchase property at Blackfriars, which they bought for £600 and intended for theatrical use
- Unfortunately, their aristocratic neighbors complained about the plans for Blackfriars
- Cuthbert Burbage tried to renegotiate The Theatre lease with Allen in the fall of 1598
- Allen vowed to put the wood and timber of the building “to better use”
- Richard and Cuthbert learned of his plans and set in motion a plot of their own: the company’s lease had contained a provision allowing them to dismantle the building themselves
- In late December of 1598, Allen left London for the countryside
- The Burbage brothers, their chief carpenter, and a party of workmen gathered at The Theatre on the night of December 28
The men stripped The Theatre down to its foundation, moved the materials across the frozen Thames to Bankside, and proceeded to use them in (re)constructing The Globe.

The endeavor was not without controversy: a furious Allen later sued Peter Street, the Burbage’s carpenter, for £800 in damages.

The courts found in favor of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men and ordered Allen to desist from any further legal action.

The Globe would play host to some of Shakespeare’s greatest works over the next decade.

The company won the right in 1609 to produce plays at Blackfriars, and subsequently split time between there and The Globe.

In 1613, the original Globe burned to the ground when a cannon shot during a performance of Henry VIII ignited the thatched roof of the gallery.

The company completed a new Globe on the foundations of its predecessor before Shakespeare’s death.

It continued operating until 1642, when the Puritans closed it down.

Puritans razed the building two years later in 1644 to build tenements upon the premises.

The Globe would remain a ghost for the next 352 years.

The foundations of the Globe were rediscovered in 1989, rekindling interest to erect a modern version of the amphitheater.
Led by the vision of the late Sam Wanamaker, workers began construction in 1993 on the new theatre near the site of the original

The latest Globe Theatre was completed in 1996; Queen Elizabeth II officially opened the theatre on June 12, 1997 with a production of *Henry V*
The Globe is as faithful a reproduction as possible to the Elizabethan model, seating 1,500 people between the galleries and the “groundlings”

In its initial 1997 season, the theatre attracted 210,000 patrons
Globe Theater, London
Shakespeare’s audience for his outdoor plays was the very rich, the upper middle class, and the lower middle class. The lower middle class paid a penny for admittance to the yard, where they stood on the ground, with the stage more or less at eye level—these spectators were called “groundlings.” The upper middle class paid two pennies for entrance to the galleries, covered seating at the sides. The rich paid three pennies to sit in the higher galleries, which had a better view. The best seats were in the lords’ rooms, private galleries closest to the stage.
To get an idea of the cost of a ticket in today’s terms, consider that the average blue-collar worker earned five to six pennies a day; bread for his midday meal cost a penny, ale cost another, and, if he were lucky enough to have chicken for dinner, it cost two pennies.

His rent was often a shilling (12 pennies) a week, so there wasn’t much money left over for play-going, nor would he have been able to take time off from work to go and see a play in the middle of the day, when they were usually performed.

Since the play was so long, people would leave their seats and go looking for food to eat and drink during the performance, or perhaps go visit with their friends.

Some playgoers, especially those who had saved up money to come and see the play, were extremely annoyed if they were unable to hear the actors, and would tell rowdy audience members to quiet down; fights and riots were common.
Later in Shakespeare’s career, his acting company was invited to perform in noble houses and royal courts.