

Elizabethan Theatre

For many hundreds of years before Shakespeare's time, people had enjoyed watching plays and shows for entertainment. However, there were no theatres. Shows were performed in barns or inn yards, often outdoors and to small audiences. The actors were known as 'players' and a group of them (or a troupe) would travel the country performing in each town or village they came to. If you were really rich, you might even hire the actors to do a turn in your home. All the actors in this era were male - the female parts were played by young boys!



Performing stories like Robin Hood was popular, but had the authorities of the day worried that it might teach people to rebel against law and order. They also worried that these travelling players were spreading the deadly plague from place to place. So, in 1572, the travelling troupes were banned.

This wasn't enough to stop the show going on though. Actors still performed in inn yards, but stayed in their home town. Then Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester had the bright idea of constructing a building especially for plays – and so the theatre as we know it today was born. The City of London Council did not like the idea though and refused to have theatres within its area, so the first one was built at the other side of the Thames in Southwark which at the time was outside the city. The first playhouse, appropriately called The Theatre, was built in 1576.

The Theatre was an immediate success and in the years that followed many more theatres sprang up such as The Rose, The Swan and The Globe. These buildings were large enough for thousands of people and cheap enough that all classes of society could attend. If you were poor, you paid a penny, but had to stand to watch the performance. Richer patrons could pay for seats with a roof to protect them from the elements. At their height, the playhouses were putting on 30-40 plays a year and giving six performances a week. The writers attached to each one would have been very busy indeed.

Elizabethan audience snippets:

- The audience did not sit quietly like we do today; they would talk, laugh and eat during a performance. They would talk back to the actors and make it known if they were not enjoying themselves.
- Good actors were known for having a voice that could be heard above the racket.
- Very rich theatre goers would pay to sit on the stage itself to watch the performance - it must have been very off-putting for the actors.
- Despite its popularity, the theatre was considered to be quite disreputable and the noblewomen who attended often wore masks to disguise their appearance.
- The poorer audience members who stood up were known as 'groundlings'.
- The groundlings often had wine, food or even spit land on their heads from the richer people in the seats above them.

