

Shakespeare's Globe Theater



I. Introduction and History

Although Shakespeare's plays were performed at other venues during the playwright's career, the Globe Theatre in the Southwark district of London was the venue at which the Bard's best known stage works (including his four great tragedies) were first produced. The Globe was built during Shakespeare's early period in 1599 by one of his long-standing associates, Cuthbert Burbage, the brother of the most famous Shakespearean actor of the Elizabethan Age, Richard Burbage.

In 1577, Cuthbert Burbage inherited another London theater that was the first of its kind and simply called the Theatre. But there was a problem with this valuable legacy: Cuthbert Burbage owned the Theatre, its structure and materials, but the land on which the Theatre was erected was leased by his father and his eldest son was unable to negotiate a renewal of the land lease. The far-sighted if fledgling impresario tore down the Theatre and used its timbers and other elements as the building materials for what would become the Globe Theatre. Before erecting the Globe at a nearby site, Cuthbert assured himself and his partners that they would have a stream of stellar content and the most renowned company of actors in England. Burbage essentially built the Globe for the Chamberlain's Men, including their chief writer, William Shakespeare. The lease for the land and the ownership of the Globe was divided in two: 50 percent of the assets were owned by Cuthbert and, Richard Burbage; the other 50 percent stake was apportioned among five other members of the Chamberlain's men, John Heminge, Augustine Phillips, Thomas Pope, Will Kempe, and, Shakespeare himself.

After some initial successes in the early years of the 1590s with the three parts of Henry VI, The Comedy of Errors and (most importantly) Richard III, during the seasons of 1592 and 1593 an outbreak of plague struck London and shuttered its theaters, causing Shakespeare to turn from the playwright's trade to the composition of poetry. It was in 1594 when the theaters of London, including the Theatre and soon the Swan Theatre (1595), reopened that Shakespeare emerged as the powerhouse of a revitalized and extraordinarily vibrant Elizabethan stage world. Five years prior to the Globe's opening, Shakespeare became one of the share-owning partners in a theater company organized under the sponsorship of the Lord Chamberlain, the head of Queen Elizabeth I's royal household. Appearing as "Chamberlain's Men," Shakespeare's acting/production company dominated the London theater scene during both the last decade of Elizabeth reign and, after 1603, under her Jacobean Age successor, James I. Indeed, under James I, Shakespeare's troop was re-dubbed "His Majesty's Servants," its principals enjoying an exalted status as members of James I's royal household. The aura of royal patronage extended to its commercial productions at the Globe, to performance staged at the more intimate Blackfriars Theatre, and, of course to special command performances before the royal court at Whitehall Palace.

II. Structure of the Globe

The theater that Cuthbert Burbage built for the Chamberlain's Men had a total capacity of between 2,000 and 3,000 spectators. Because there was no lighting, all performances at the Globe were conducted, weather permitting, during the day (probably most often in the mid-afternoon span between 2 P.M. and 5 P.M.). Because most of the Globe and all of its stage was open air, acoustics were poor and the actors were compelled by circumstances to shout their lines, stress their enunciation, and engage in exaggerated theatrical gestures. What would seem most striking to a modern (Broadway) theatergoer about the productions staged at the Globe is that they were completely devoid of background scenery. Although costumes and props were utilized, changes of scene in Shakespeare's plays were not conducted by stagehands during brief curtain closings. There was no proscenium arch, no curtains, and no stagehands to speak of other than the actors themselves. Instead, changes of scene were indicated explicitly or implicitly in the speeches and narrative situations that Shakespeare wrote into the text of the plays.

The stage of the Globe was a level platform about 43 feet in width some 27 or 28 feet deep that was raised about five feet off the ground. The stage was fitted with a number of mechanisms (trap doors in its floor for instance), and distinct sections (e.g., a sub-stage space toward its back lip for parallel action) that were creatively utilized by Shakespeare in his stage directions. It was surrounded on three sides by the "pit" in which "one-penny" spectators stood and, at a setback, by an amphitheater three stories high, each having a gallery and seating for "two-penny" theatergoers. While the galleries of the two-penny section may have been partially covered, the stage and the pit were open air. On the fourth side of the stage was an adjacent "tiring" house, where costumes changes were made. It was capped by a small turret structure, from which a flag and a trumpeter would announce the day's performances.

III. The Audience and the Actors

During Shakespeare's era, the Globe Theatre was not in the formal jurisdiction of London per se, but was located on the south side of the Thames River in the Southwark district. Along with its predecessors and rivals, the Globe Theatre was part of what might be called the "sporting district" (if not the "red light district") of Greater London. Although condemned by London authorities, along with cock-fighting, bear-baiting and the bawdy attractions of taverns, the Southwark theater district operated outside the legal reach of the City's officials. But while the Globe Theatre, and indeed, the entire Elizabethan theater scene opened its doors to the low life of the pits, it also accommodated an audience of higher-status, well-heeled, and better educated individuals. As Harry Levin notes in his general introduction to the Riverside Shakespeare (1974), the "Globe was truly a microcosm or little world of man". With its logo of Hercules holding up the earth (as a temporary replacement to Atlas), the Globe Theatre constituted a "little world" in which the social elite rubbed up against a cross-section of common vulgarians, drunken idlers, and other shady, street-wise sorts. Yet, at the same time, the Globe was grand even in the eyes of Elizabethan society's most powerful and prosperous leaders. As Levin also observes in his prefatory essay, recently discovered documents indicate that reconstructions of the Globe as "a quaint little Tudor cottage" have been errant, since Burbage's house "may have had arches, pilaster, and other details of Baroque architecture". Contemporaneous accounts suggests that the Globe was far more impressive than the thatched and half-timbered models of it can capture, having a more spectacular look to its structure than is commonly recognized, one that was further heightened by property embellishments (e.g. fabric hangings) and spectacular pageantry.

As the disapproval of the Globe and its counterparts by London's town fathers suggests, the Elizabethan theater and the acting companies that animated it were looked upon askance by at least some conservative elements in England. Considered a purple profession, acting was a precarious way of life even during the relatively enlightened reigns of Elizabeth and James. Most stage players were vulnerable to arrest on charges of vagrancy if they were not under the protection of a powerful sponsor. Shakespeare's company at the Globe was set apart by virtue of being formally patronized by first the Lord Chamberlain of Queen Elizabeth and then by King James I himself.

A total of 26 names are recorded as the "Principal Actors" of Shakespeare's company at the Globe in the First Folio of the Bard's collected plays. Near the top of the list we find Richard Burbage, brother to Cuthbert, major partner in the Globe, and the foremost tragedian of the Elizabethan stage. The sole owner of another, significantly smaller venue (the Blackfriars Theatre), Richard Burbage initiated the performance of some of Shakespeare's most famous characters, including Hamlet, Lear, and Othello, and brought even greater vitality to other roles, e.g., Richard III. The extent to which Shakespeare wrote his great tragic hero roles with Burbage in mind cannot be determined, but the indirect evidence strongly suggests that the playwright knew in advance that Burbage would be the "star" and had him in mind when he created the characters of Hamlet, Lear, Othello and the like. Despite the need for exaggeration in the Globe's outdoor setting, Burbage was best known for his naturalistic style of acting, his subtler performances standing in sharp relief to the wild rantings of his peers.

Prior to the Globe's opening in 1599, the leading comic actor of the Chamberlain's men (and another shareholder in the Globe) was Will Kemp. His roles included those of the servant Peter in *Romeo and Juliet*, (probably) Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and (quite possibly), Falstaff of the *Henry IV* plays. In 1599, Kemp prepared to cede his position as the leading comic actor of Shakespeare's troop when another popular comedian, Robert Armin, joined the Chamberlain's Men. Armin's capacity for wordplay through malaprops and half-meant puns became legendary, particularly in the clown roles of Touchstone (*As You Like It*) and Feste (*Twelfth Night*); it is possible that Armin made his debut at the Globe in the role of Feste, with Viola, the heroine of *Twelfth Night* saying, "This fellow is wise enough to play the fool" (III, i., 1.60). In any event, during the great tragedies period, Armin was blessed with one of the best comic roles in Shakespeare's canon, that of the Fool in *King Lear*.

IV. Shakespeare and the End of the Globe

It is often mentioned in passing that Shakespeare himself appeared as an actor on the Globe's stage. This aspect of the Bard's life in the theater should not be over-estimated. Shakespeare's name appears in the cast lists of plays written by himself and by other Elizabethan authors, but there is no indication of the roles that he played. Tradition ascribes two parts to Shakespeare himself, that of the Ghost of Hamlet's Father in *Hamlet* and that of Adam, the loyal, aged servant in *As You Like It*. In 1603, Shakespeare apparently acted in a play written by his friend and fellow author, Ben Jonson, but this is last time and last date in which Shakespeare is mentioned in the cast lists of the Elizabethan/Jacobean theater. Shakespeare acted, but this activity was subordinate not only to his work as a playwright but also to his labors as a theatrical producer.

The original structure of the Globe Theatre stood until 29 June, 1613, when its thatched roof was set ablaze by a cannon fired in a performance of *Henry VIII* and the Globe burned to the ground. By this time, Shakespeare was in semi-retirement at Stratford-on-Avon where he would die three years later at the age of fifty-two. The Globe was reconstructed in 1614, with tiles replacing flammable straw on its partial roof. In 1642, however, a quarter-century after Shakespeare's death, a new, Puritanical and decidedly anti-theater regime assumed power in England and closed down all of the country's theaters. Two years later, Cromwell's round heads tore down the Globe, leveled the site and constructed tenement housing upon it.