

ELIZABETHAN THEATER

Even in an era when popular entertainment included public executions and cock-fighting, theater became central to Elizabethan social life. As drama shifted from a religious to a secular function in society, playwrights and poets were among the leading artists of the day. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the popularity of plays written by scholars such as Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, John Lyly, and Thomas Lodge led to the building of theaters and to the development of companies of actors, both professional and amateur. These companies of players traveled throughout England, generally performing in London in the winter and spring, and navigating notoriously neglected roads throughout the English countryside during the summers when plague ravaged the city. Professional companies were also retained for the private entertainment of English aristocracy.

In spite of its popularity, the Elizabethan theater attracted criticism, censorship, and scorn from some sectors of English society. The plays were often coarse and boisterous, and playwrights and actors belonged to a bohemian class. Puritan leaders and officers of the Church of England considered actors to be of questionable character, and they criticized playwrights for using the stage to disseminate their irreverent opinions. They also feared the overcrowded theater spaces might lead to the spread of disease.

At times throughout the sixteenth century, Parliament censored plays for profanity, heresy, or politics. But Queen Elizabeth and later King James offered protections that ultimately allowed the theater to survive. To appease Puritan concerns, the Queen established rules prohibiting the construction of theaters and theatrical performances within the London city limits. The rules were loosely enforced, however, and playhouses such as the Curtain, the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan were constructed just outside of London, within easy reach of the theater-going public. These public playhouses paved the way for the eventual emergence of professional companies as stable business organizations.

Among the actors who performed in the Elizabethan theater, Richard Burbage is perhaps the best known. Burbage was the leading actor in Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and he is credited with portraying a range of dramatic leads including Richard III, Hamlet, Lear, and Othello. An actor himself, Shakespeare played roles in his own plays, usually as older male characters. Acting was not considered an appropriate profession for women in the Elizabethan era, and even into the seventeenth century acting companies consisted of men with young boys playing the female roles. Instead of clothing reflecting the station of their characters, Elizabethan actors wore lavish


costumes consistent with upperclass dress. In contrast, stage scenery was minimal, perhaps consisting solely of painted panels placed upstage.

Elizabethan theaters were makeshift, dirty, and loud, but nevertheless they attracted audiences as large as 3,000 from all social classes. Performances were usually given in the afternoons, lasting two to three hours. As in both ancient and contemporary theaters, each section of the theater bore a different price of admission, with the lowest prices in the pit below stage level where patrons stood to watch the play. Most performance spaces were arranged "in-the-round," giving spectators the opportunity to watch both the play and the behavior of other spectators. Etiquette did not prohibit the audiences from freely

expressing their distaste or satisfaction for the action on stage.

The rich theatrical flowering begun by Shakespeare and his contemporaries continued into the seventeenth century, well beyond the reign of Queen Elizabeth. In 1642, however, with the country on the verge of a civil war, the Puritan Parliament closed the theaters and forbade stage plays in an edict that argued that theater distracted the fragmented nation from its efforts to "appease and avert the wrath of God." When King Charles II took the English throne in 1660, the theaters were

reopened, and the arts were again celebrated. His reign became known as the Restoration, but the greatest period of England theater had already run its course.

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SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

During his lifetime, many of Shakespeare's 38 plays were published in what are known as Quarto editions, often without the playwright's permission. Many were flawed versions, including or deleting entire passages. The first collected edition of his plays, the *First Folio*, was published after his death by two members of his acting company, John Heminges and Henry Condell. Since then the works of Shakespeare have been studied, translated, and enjoyed the world over as masterpieces of the English language.

Establishing the chronology of Shakespeare's plays is a difficult task.

It is impossible to know the exact order of succession because there is no record of the first production date of any of his works. Although dating is conjectural, scholars have decided upon a specific play chronology based upon the following sources of information: 1) historical events and allusions to those events in the plays; 2) the records of performances of the plays — taken from such places as the diaries of contemporaries; 3) the publication dates of sources; and 4) the dates that the plays appear in print (the production of a play immediately followed its composition).

