

Elizabethan Theatre History Timeline



Picture of the Globe Theatre

Elizabethan Theatre History Timeline

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Elizabethan Theatre History

The history of the Elizabethan Theatre is a short and turbulent one as the Elizabethan Theatre Timeline will clearly indicate. The success and popularity of the Elizabethan theatre during the life of Shakespeare is an outstanding success story for the theatrical entrepreneurs of the era. The Elizabethan era saw the rise in the popularity of theatres and during this time the staging of plays moved from renovated inn-yards to the building of huge out door amphitheatres, such as the Globe, which were used for the summer seasons and the building or renovation of indoor theatres, used in the Winter seasons and by royalty, called Playhouses. The history of the Elizabethan Theatre started in 1576 as the Elizabethan Theatre timeline shows.

The Rise and Fall of the Elizabethan Theaters - the Timeline

The rise of the Elizabethan theatres start in 1576 but by 1648 theatres and playhouses were ordered to be pulled down, all players to be seized and whipped, and anyone caught attending a play to be fined five shillings! What events took place to lead to such a reverse of fortune for the theatres? What happened? The timeline and history of the Elizabethan Theatre provides all of the answers.

History and Timeline of the Elizabethan Theatre

The Elizabethan Theater History and Timeline

Please refer to the Elizabethan Era sitemap for further details of all Shakespearean and Elizabethan history and timeline information.

1564 April 23 William Shakespeare was born

1576 James Burbage (father of the actor, Richard Burbage) obtains lease and permission to build 'The Theatre' in Shoreditch, London. The Lord Chamberlain's Men use it from 1594 to 1596

1577 Another open air amphitheatre called The Curtain opens in Finsbury Fields, Shoreditch, London

1587 Open air amphitheatre The Rose, Bankside, Surrey is opened

- 1593 Theatres close due to the Bubonic Plague (The Black Death)**
- 1594 The Lord Chamberlain's Company (formally known as 'Lord Stranges Men') was formed.**
- 1595 March 15, First document mentioning Shakespeare connected with the Theatre**
- 1596 From 1596 to 1597 London's authorities banned the public presentation of plays within the city limits of London**
- 1596 James Burbage purchases Blackfriars and converts it to a theatre. Unable to get permission to open as a theatre it stands empty**
- 1597 Dispute over the lease of 'the Theatre'. The Puritan owner, Giles Allen, disapproved of the Theatre and the acting troupe. Burbage opens negotiations to re-new the lease of the 'Theatre'**
- 1597 Shakespeare's company of actors moved to the Curtain Theatre after failed negotiations for a new lease for the 'Theatre'**
- 1598 Christmas - Timber from the 'Theatre' taken to use for the building of a new theatre to be called the Globe**
- 1599 The Globe Theatre is opened on Bankside**
- 1600 Richard Burbage is forced to lease out Blackfriars.**
- 1603 The Bubonic Plague (The Black Death) again ravages London killing 33,000 people - all theatres close**
- 1613 June 29, Fire at the Globe Theatre**
- 1614 Globe Theatre was rebuilt on original foundations, this time the roof is tiled, not thatched**
- 1616 April 25, Burial of William Shakespeare in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford.**
- 1642 The English Civil War breaks out between the Parliamentarians (Puritans) and the Royalists**
- 1642 September 2 - Parliament issues an ordinance suppressing all stage plays**
- 1644 The Globe Theatre demolished by the Puritans. 15th April - Landowner Sir Matthew Brend demolishes the Globe and builds tenement houses on the site**
- 1647 Even stricter rules passed by the Puritans restricting the staging of plays**
- 1648 The Puritans ordered all playhouses and theatres to be pulled down, all players to be seized and whipped, and anyone caught attending a play to be fined five shillings.**
- 1649 The Civil War finally leads to the terrible execution of King Charles I by the Parliamentarians (Puritans)**
- 1653 Oliver Cromwell becomes Lord Protector of England**
- 1658 Cromwell dies and the power of the Puritan starts to decline**
- 1660 King Charles II is restored to the throne of England**
- 1660 The Restoration, and the demise in the power of the Puritans, sees the opening of the theatres again**
- Elizabethan Theatre History and Timeline**

Elizabethan Theatre History Timeline

Architecture of Elizabethan Theatres

Elizabethan Architecture
Architecture of Elizabethan Castles
Architecture of Elizabethan Houses

Architecture of Elizabethan Theatres

The Architecture of Elizabethan Theatres - think of a public outdoor structure like the Coliseum or a small football stadium with a capacity of between 1500 and 3000 people and this gives you a good idea about the architecture of an Elizabethan theatre! James Burbage built the very first theatre with his brother-in-law John Brayne, appropriately named 'The Theatre'. The architecture of 'The Theatre' was designed as a construction which was similar to a small Roman amphitheatre - the Elizabethan Amphitheatre. The features of the existing blood sport rings were used with the addition of a fixed stage. The other important feature was the cobbled yard, as opposed to the bare earth floor suited to animals.

Architecture of Elizabethan Theatres - classical elements of Greek architecture

Classic Greek and Roman architecture was admired by the Elizabethans and sometimes great columns framed the entrances of many great Elizabethan houses. Two great columns were included in the architecture of the Elizabethan theatres which were called 'Herculean' columns or pillars - these were elaborately painted to resemble marble. The architecture of the Elizabethan theatres was deliberately designed to reflect elements of Roman or Greek architecture thus elevating the shabby reputation of plays and actors to the much admired Greek or Roman classical plays!

Architect of the Elizabethan Theatre

James Burbage had many ideas about creating the first Elizabethan theatre. He started his career as a joiner and was therefore experienced in carpentry. But he did not have the knowledge required to create the similarity to the classical Greek and Roman theatres. But he knew a man who did! James Burbage consulted Dr. John Dee (1527-1608) on the design and construction of 'The Theatre'. The notorious Dr. Dee, renowned as an Elizabethan magician and alchemist, was also extremely knowledgeable about architecture. James Burbage relied on Dee's extensive architectural library to design the plans for the construction of The Theatre.

Interesting Facts and Information about Architecture of Elizabethan Theatres

The following table provides some interesting facts and information about Elizabethan Architecture and Architecture of Elizabethan Theatres

Architecture & Structure of Elizabethan Theatres	
Amphitheatre facts	Open arena - the actors would also get wet if it rained!
Size of amphitheatre	Up to 100 feet in diameter
Varying Shapes	Octagonal, circular in shape having between 8 and 24 sides
Building materials	Timber, nails, stone (flint), plaster and thatched roofs. Later amphitheatres had tiled roofs
Building Duration	6 months
Overall design	The open air arena, called the 'pit' or the 'yard', had a raised stage at one end and was surrounded by three tiers of roofed galleries with balconies overlooking the back of the stage. The stage projected halfway into the 'pit'
Audience Capacity	1500 plus. Up to 3000 people would flock to the theatre and its grounds

The Grounds of the theatre	Bustling with people. Stalls selling merchandise and refreshments. Attracted non playgoers to the market
Toilet Facilities	None . People relieved themselves outside. Sewage was buried in pits or disposed of in the River Thames. All theatres closed during outbreaks of the <u>Bubonic Plague</u> - disease would have spread via the rats & fleas
The Entrance to the theater	Usually one main entrance. Some later theatres had external staircases to access the galleries
Access to the Balconies & Galleries	Two sets of stairs, either side if the theater. The first gallery would cost another penny in the box which was held by a collector at the front of the stairs. The second gallery would cost another penny
The interior design	Design was similar but far smaller version (1500 -3000 crowd capacity) than the Coliseum of the Roman period (50,000 crowd capacity) allowing the maximum number if playgoers in the space available
Lighting	Natural lighting as plays were produced in the afternoon. However there was some artificial lighting mainly intended to provide atmosphere for night scenes
Heating	There was no heating. Plays were performed in the summer months and transferred to the indoor playhouses during the winter
Stage dimensions	Varying from 20 foot wide 15 foot deep to 45 feet to 30 feet
The height of the stage	A raised stage - 3 to 5 feet and supported by large pillars or trestles
The floor of the Stage	Made of wood, sometimes covered with rushes. Trap doors would enable some special effects e.g. smoke
The rear of the Stage	A roofed house-like structure was at the rear of the stage, supported by two large columns (pillars)
The 'Herculean' columns or pillars	The 'Herculean' pillars were made of huge, single tree trunks. These were drilled through the centre to eliminate warping of the wood
The 'Heavens' - a roof area	The pillars supported a roof called the 'Heavens'
The 'Heavens'	The 'Heavens' served to create an area hidden from the audience. This area provided a place for actors to hide. A selection of ropes & rigging would allow for special effects, such as flying or dramatic entries
The stage wall called the 'Frons Scenae' taken from Latin	Behind the pillars was the stage wall. A doorway to the left and right and a curtained central doorway from which the actors made their entrances. Above the door area was a highly decorative screen called the 'Frons Scenae' (taken from the name given by Imperial Rome to the stage walls of their amphitheatres)
The Stage Gallery above the Stage Wall - The ' Lord's rooms'	Immediately above stage wall was the stage gallery that was used by actors (Juliet's balcony) & the rich the nobility - known as 'Lord's rooms.'
The stage wall called the 'Frons Scenae' taken from Latin	Behind the pillars was the stage wall, covered by a curtain. Above the curtain was a highly decorative screen. The 'Frons Scenae' was the name given by Imperial Rome to the stage walls of their amphitheatres
The Balcony above the Stage Wall - The ' Lord's rooms'	Immediately above stage wall was a balcony that was used either by actors (Juliet's balcony) or the rich the nobility - known as 'Lord's rooms.'
The 'Lord's rooms'	Considered the best seats in the 'house' despite the poor view of the back of the actors. The audience would have a good view of the Lords. And the Lords were able to hear the actors clearly. The cost was 5 pence & cushioned seats were provided
The 'Gentlemen's rooms'	There were additional balconies on the left and right of the 'lord's

	rooms' which were called the 'Gentlemen's rooms. For rich patrons of the theater - the cost was 4 pence & cushioned seats were provided
The 'Tiring House'	The stage wall contained at least two doors which lead to a leading to small structure, back stage, called the 'Tiring House'. The stage wall was covered by a curtain. The actors used this area to change their attire
The 'Hut'	Above the 'Tiring House' was a small house-like structure called the 'hut' complete with roof. Used as covered storage space for the troupe
The 'pit' (also referred to as the 'yard')	The stage projected halfway into the 'pit', also called the 'yard' (if tiled or cobbled) where the commoners (groundlings) paid 1 penny to stand to watch the play. They would have crowded around the 3 sides of the stage.
Access to the Galleries	Two sets of stairs, either side if the theater. The stairways could also be external to the main structure to give maximum seating space
Seats in the galleries - Three levels	The seats in each of the three levels of galleries were tiered with three rows of wooden benches, increasing in size towards the back, following the shape of the building. The galleries were covered affording some shelter from the elements.

Architecture of Elizabethan Theatres

Details, facts and information about the Architecture of Elizabethan Theatres and Elizabethan Architecture can be accessed via the Elizabethan Era Sitemap.

Architecture of Elizabethan Theatres

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