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Early English Theatres

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EARLY ENGLISH THEATRES

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Honors Special Studies
Mr. Dennis Holt, Sr.

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EARLY ENGLISH THEATRES

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, sport and amusement became increasingly popular to everyone. Even the poor were enthusiastic and interested in drama. Although different forms of plays like the miracle and morality had existed for many years, the drama had finally outgrown the inn-yard and wagon stages. Therefore, a new place was necessary for the presentation of plays. These "new places" were called theatres.

There were three kinds of theatres in Queen Elizabeth's time. They were the public theatres, the private theatres, and the court theatre.

Recognizing the need for theatres, James Burbage, a carpenter and actor, built the first theatre in England in 1576 which was a public theatre. Because the Mayor of London and many of the city fathers were Puritans, Burbage could not build his theatre in London. So he found a site between Shoreditch and Finsbury Fields, just outside the jurisdiction of the Mayor. He erected a circular wooden structure at a cost between six and seven hundred pounds. He called it simply The Theatre. It was supposed to have accommodated over a thousand people, but this is rather doubtful.¹ Having played in many of the inn-yards, Burbage naturally built his theatre on much the same lines as the galleried inn, except he made it circular rather than rectangle. Little is known about its structural details except that the galleries around the pit were open to the sky. The stage had a balcony at the rear where a curtain hung to form the inner stage. On either side of this there was probably a "tiring

house" in which costumes and their few properties were stored.¹

Although The Theatre was rather primitive, it served its purpose well. Drama thrived in it for over twenty years.

It was at The Theatre that William Shakespeare brought many of his plays. The Comedy of Errors, Love's Labour's Lost, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Richard II, The Merchant of Venice, and Henry IV are some of his plays that were probably performed on this stage.¹ The leading actors were Richard Burbage, son of James Burbage, Henry Condell, and John Heminge.

Soon after Burbage opened The Theatre, another one was opened in Moorfields on a piece of land called Curtayne Close. This theatre was called The Curtain after the name of the land, not because the builder had in mind the use of a curtain. It was run by Henry Laneman.

Although the Puritans wanted these theatres closed and even issued pleas to the Queen to do so, the theatres remained open and grew even more popular. Another theatre was built about 1591, The Rose. It was constructed on the Bankside and used first by the company of "Lord Strange's Men." It was circular and had a thatched roof to its galleries, but the pit was roofless.

In 1594 another public theatre was constructed. The Swan was bigger than any before with twelve sides. However, it was not very good for dramatic productions and was often used for other purposes like exhibitions and cruel sports. After 1621, it was used just for prize-fighting.

A quarrel arose in 1598 between James Burbage's two sons concerning the lease of The Theatre. The result was that they pulled it down and used its timber to build The Globe, the most famous theatre of

its time. It was opened the next year with the performance of King Henry V. It was for this theatre and "The Lord Chamberlain's Men" that Shakespeare wrote his most famous plays. It is almost definitely believed that it was circular in shape because of what is written in the prologue of King Henry V:

...Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France, or may we cram
Within this wooden O, the very casques¹
That did affright the air at Agincourt?

Its galleries had thatched roofs and a bare wooden platform. It is said that Shakespeare was very attached to The Globe. However, during a performance of King Henry VIII on June 29, 1613, The Globe Theatre caught on fire. One of the volleys of shots that was used in announcing the entrance of the king in the play hit the thatched roof, and in minutes the entire theatre was in flames. Sir Henry Wotton's contemporary account of the fire states, "Only one man had his breeches set on fire, that would have perhaps broyled him, if he had not by the benefit of a provident wit put it out with a bottle of ale."²

The Puritans immediately went about saying that this was God's judgment of the theatre. However, a new, more substantial Globe was erected the next year. It was octagonal and had a tiled roof. It began to decline in 1635, and the Puritans finally succeeded in tearing it down in 1644.

The Hope, another octagonal theatre, was built in 1614, on much the same pattern as The Swan. It had a brick foundation, a tiled roof, external staircases to the galleries, and a movable stage. One of the special features in it was its exceptional comfort in the more expensive seats. This theatre, too, was later used for prize-fighting and bull-baiting. Because of this, the name was later changed to Bear Garden.

Even more elaborat than The Hope was The Fortune. This was a square theatre built north of the Thames River in 1660. It had a brick foundation and a wooden framework. There were "gentlemen's rooms" and "twopenny rooms" with ceilings. It had a stage forty-three feet wide extending into the middle of the pit. An advertisement in Mercurius Politicus for February 14, 1661, announced that it was to be torn down to permit the construction of twenty-three houses with gardens.² This gives a good idea of the space the theatre occupied. Its tiled roof had gutters at the back to carry off the rain where it would not empty on the heads of the actors or spectators. It took its name from the statue of the Goddess of Fortune which stood in front of it. This playhouse was intended to hold twenty thousand spectators. The theatres were gradually growing larger and larger. Twenty years after its first performance in 1601, it was destroyed by fire; and everything was lost, including all the costumes and playbooks.

In all of these public theatres the pits were open to the sky; therefore, the number of performances each week depended on the weather. When a play was to be given, a flag was raised. If it rained suddenly, the flags were pulled down and the afternoon performance cancelled.

The plays were advertised by writing just the name of the play on handbills and posting them all over the city. Most of the plays in the public theatres started between one and three o'clock in the afternoon. The trumpeters sent out a ringing call to let the people know the time the play was to begin. Enthusiastic citizens sent their servants two or three hours in advance to save them a seat.

In these Elizabethan theatres, the main action and dialogue took place at the front of the stage. At the rear of the stage there was a balcony with a curtain below it ^{to} form the inner stage. This inner

stage was very important. When characters had to be discovered, the inner stage was used. It could be a cave, bedroom, or anything in which a person could hide himself for awhile. The balcony itself served as an upper room, the city wall, or any elevated place. It was sometimes used to accommodate the musicians. Higher still was a small room or hut in the roof. This room was sometimes used as the heavens where angels could descend. There were usually two doors on either side of the inner stage, and above them were usually windows or tiny balconies. In the center of the outer stage there were one or two trapdoors to allow the entrance and exit of devils and ghosts.

The price of admission of these public theatres was taken at the entrance, but there were several additional "gatherers" inside the theatre whose business it was to go around claiming the extra charges from those who occupied the better seats. These collectors were invariably dishonest. In most theatres one could stand in the pit for only a penny or two. These "groundlings," as they were called, were a very mixed crowd. There were pickpockets, prostitutes, and drunks as well as some tradesmen, apprentices, servants, mechanics, soldiers, and sailors. The seats in the "gentlemen's boxes" were about half-a-crown. Prices were doubled or even trebled for first performances. While waiting for the play to begin, the Elizabethan audience ate apples, drank ale, smoked, and played cards or dice. Too often the audience has been considered ignorant and rowdy and altogether undesirable. It was true that some could not read, but such an audience could and did have very sharp ears and an eagerness for ideas and emotions that could come only from the stage.³ Elizabethan audiences demanded plenty of fighting, brutality, ghosts, and devils. They loved stories of horror, rape, and villainy; and the comedies had to be vulgar.

Private theatres were also very popular. The first one was built in the same year as Burbage's Theatre, 1576. This was called the Blackfriars Theatre, established by Richard Farrant for the use of the "Children of the Chapel." These private theatres of the Shakespearean period were smaller theatres to which the more aristocratic playgoers resorted. They were little more than large halls with a stage at one end, though they probably had galleries of some sort.¹ Anyone could buy admission to a private theatre, but because the price of seats ranged from sixpence to two shillings instead of from a penny to a shilling, the audience was a bit more select. In these theatres everyone had a seat. Child actors were the most common with the private theatres, and the repertory of these theatres leaned toward the sophisticated comedy.

The main difference between the public and the private theatres was that the latter were roofed and used artificial light.³ Where public theatres had to present their plays in the clear afternoons, the others could play in the evening and in any kind of weather.

After the middle of the sixteenth century, plays at the court became more popular. The Children of the Chapel and the boys at St. Paul's School appeared frequently at court, but these child plays eventually gave way to professional adult companies. When Shakespeare appeared in London, the players were taking to the court of Elizabeth the same plays that they were performing at The Theatre and The Curtain. This is proof that despite the attitude of the Puritans, the Queen and her court appreciated the same drama that appealed to the masses.

The court performances were more elaborate than the public theatres. Special emphasis was placed on the scenery. It was usually made from canvas on a wooden framework. In 1581 over a hundred pounds was spent

in one court play for the construction of a hill surmounted by a castle "with falling sides, tree with shields, hermitage and hermit, savages, enchanter, and chariots."¹

The public theatres were slow to adopt the many new ideas and improvements devised for the court performances, although properties and costumes were occasionally borrowed officially and unofficially from the court. The expense of the spectacular court theatre was no doubt the reason why tragedy and comedy, with the more simple settings, continued to be the mainstay of the public theatres.

Obviously, the theatre of the Elizabethan period was popular to all classes of people. There was some form of theatre in existence from 1576 when James Burbage built The Theatre until the Puritans under Charles I forced the closing of them in 1642. The theatres during those sixty-six years were important because of the effect they had on the people of that time. The popularity of the theatres showed that the Elizabethans were interested in broadening their lives. It showed they liked getting out of their houses and away from their work. What is more, the twentieth century theatre is the direct result of these early English theatres. Truly, it is due to the quest and appreciation of drama during the seventeenth century that we can enjoy drama today.

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