

The Theatre in Shakespeares' Time

While studying Elizabethan age, it is important to take note of how theatres had risen and catered to the mass demand for entertainment during that period. As dramatists rose to prominence so the theatres in Elizabethan era. The public playhouse of the 16th century England was nothing more than an ordinary inn-yard, open to the weather and among its audience were louts, pickpockets, prostitutes and the street crowd of riff-raffs. The presentation was often rough and noisy, with fireworks to represent storms and battles and a table and a few chairs to represent a tavern. As there were no actresses, female parts were also played by male actors. However, costumes were often elaborate and beautiful.

For centuries in England noblemen had employed groups of skilled people to entertain them when required. In Elizabeth's period, as England became more secure and united, actors were given more freedom and public performances started to happen. London was rapidly becoming larger and more important in the second half of the sixteenth century, actors started their performances in inn-yards with consent from the inn-keepers. Before long, some inns were taken over completely by companies of players and thus became the first public theatres. By 1590s, when Shakespeare's plays were beginning to be performed, audiences consisted of a good cross-section of English society including nobility, intellectuals as well as workers and the general public.

The Theatre was the first public theatre to be built in England by James Burbage in 1576. Like the many other playhouses that followed, it was a multi-sided structure with a central, uncovered "yard" surrounded by three tiers of covered seating and a bare, raised stage at one end of the yard. Shakespeare's company, the Lord chamberlain's Men, was one of several to perform at the Theatre by about 1594. The Globe, which opened in 1599, became the playhouse where audiences first saw some of Shakespeare's best-known plays.

In 1642, the English playhouses and theatres were closed down as the English Civil War began. With the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, theatre returned- as did Shakespeare's plays, now with both male and female performers. The first recorded performance of an actress occurred in December 1660, She appeared as Desdemona in Othello.