

A VISIT TO THE THEATRE IN SHAKESPEARE'S TIME

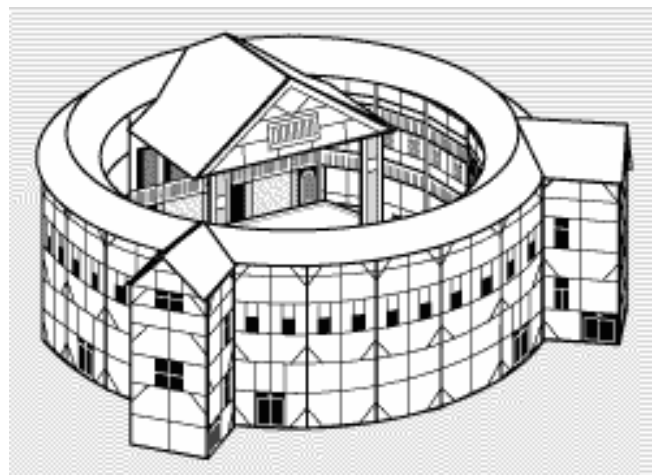
Imagine you are living in 1592, Shakespeare's time, and you are going to the theatre. You set off at lunchtime. All plays take place during the day because electricity has not been discovered yet. You may arrive at the theatre by boat across the River Thames, but you can save your ferry fare and walk across London Bridge. As you approach the Globe Theatre you pass the pits where bear baiting and cockfighting take place. A flag is flying from the roof which means that there is a performance today. People are crazy for the theatre, flocking to see the latest plays and ogle at their favourite actors. Anyone and everyone goes to the theatre in London. About 21,000 Londoners go to the theatre every week. That's over a tenth of the city's population – so it could be a fairly busy journey!

The play begins at 2 o'clock sharp and in order to hurry people along a loud shot is heard from a tower. Performances always take place at the same time on every day of the week except Sunday and during Lent. The theatres were also shut from October to April because the audience is not fully protected from the weather and people do not want to watch plays in the freezing cold.

You enter the building and see the stage in front of you. Two pillars on the stage support a roof for the actors. This is called the 'Heavens' and is painted with stars, a sun and a moon. At the back of the stage is the musicians' gallery. Musicians with trumpets, drums and other instruments play tunes and make sound effects. As you look around at the audience you will see lots of different types of people. At the top of the building there are galleries where merchants, sea-captains and clerks sit. They have paid between 2-6 pence for their seats. There are 'Gentlemen's Rooms' or boxes for rich and famous people and these cost a shilling. Finally the lower class citizens, or servants and apprentices, are standing in the yard or 'pit' in front of the stage and are known as 'groundlings.' They have only had to pay a penny. It's not always fun for the people standing in the 'pit' because sometimes a play can last four hours!

Once the trumpet has sounded and the audience is in their correct places the play will commence. The actors will have been rehearsing all morning and usually have to learn eight hundred words a day. They also have a double up parts, design sets, produce special effects, sell tickets and refreshments and prompt the actors on stage. By the end of the day they must be exhausted. Don't be surprised when the actors playing the female parts are not women. Instead young men dressed up as women play these parts. Women are not allowed to act in 1592 because it is considered shameless and unladylike.

The audience make a lot of noise during performances – more like spectators at a modern football match than a visit to see a play – cheering, hissing, clapping, booing and crying. You can tell if they do not like the performance as they will heckle and if they enjoy it they might start to sing along to any songs. Pedlars, or street sellers, go amongst the crowd selling food and drink to anyone who is hungry or who simply wants to throw something at the actors. It's a very smelly place. You may be able to detect the smell of sweaty, dirty bodies, food and also the open buckets that are used as toilets!



So sit down and enjoy the show, but remember to keep a lookout for pickpockets as they also have a good time at the theatre!

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why did all the plays take place during daylight hours?
2. What time exactly did the performances begin?
3. In which two ways did people travel to the theatre?
4. What sort of activities might they pass on the way to the theatre?
5. What did it mean when the flag was flying on top of the theatre?
6. How many people visited the theatre in one week in London in 1592?
7. Why, do you think, stars, a sun and a moon were painted on the roof above the stage?
8. Who made the sound effects for the performance?
9. Who sat in the 'Gentlemen's Rooms' or boxes?
10. Name five jobs that an actor may have done for the theatre group.
11. Why weren't women allowed to act at this time?
12. What did pedlars sell during the performance?
13. What might the audience do during the performance?
14. Why did the theatre often smell unpleasant?
15. Who, other than the audience, enjoyed visiting the theatre and why?

CREATIVE WRITING:

Using the information from the sheet, and your imagination, describe a day at the theatre as if you are one of the following: (a) an actor (b) someone in the audience (c) a pedlar (d) a pickpocket.