

Introduction to Shakespeare Lesson 2: **Elizabethan Theatre**



Learning Objective

To explore the theatre experience in Shakespeare's time.

Success Criteria

- All pupils will be able to explain how theatre developed in Elizabethan times
- Most pupils will be able to understand how the theatre experience has changed from then until now
- Some pupils will be able to clearly explain the differences between modern and Elizabethan theatre.

Theatre Rules



Think of three 'rules' you abide by when you go to the theatre or the cinema, there is one already to start you off.

Write them down, we'll come back to them later.

1. **No loud talking during the performance.**

Entertainment

Think of as many things as you can that we can do to entertain ourselves today:



How many of these were available in Shakespeare's time?

Shakespearean Entertainment

In Shakespeare's time, there wasn't as much entertainment as there is now. Most people couldn't read, so that was not an option.

There was no electricity, so evenings could be long, dark and boring.

Here are some of the things Elizabethans did in their spare time:

- Bear baiting
- Chess
- Dancing at festivals or holy day celebrations
- Games such as hide and seek and blind man's buff
- Bowls
- Cards
- Go to the theatre



Let Me Entertain You

Watching plays and shows was one of the most popular forms of entertainment.

Read your information sheet to tell you about Elizabethan theatre.

Elizabethan Theatre

For many hundreds of years before Shakespeare's time, people had enjoyed watching plays and shows for entertainment. However, there were no theatres. Shows were performed in barns or inn yards, often outdoors and to small audiences. The actors were known as 'players' and a group of them (or a troupe) would travel the country performing in each town or village they came to. If you were really rich, you might even hire the actors to do a turn in your home. All the actors in this era were male - the female parts were played by young boys!



Performing stories like Robin Hood was popular, but had the authorities of the day worried that it might teach people to rebel against law and order. They also worried that these travelling players were spreading the deadly plague from place to place. So, in 1572, the travelling troupes were banned.

This wasn't enough to stop the show going on though. Actors still performed in inn yards, but stayed in their home town. Then Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester had the bright idea of constructing a building especially for plays - and so the theatre as we know it today was born. The City of London Council did not like the idea though and refused to have theatres within its area, so the first one was built at the other side of the Thames in Southwark which at the time was outside the city. The first playhouse, appropriately called The Theatre, was built in 1576.

The Theatre was an immediate success and in the years that followed many more theatres sprang up such as The Rose, The Swan and The Globe. These buildings were large enough for thousands of people and cheap enough that all classes of society could attend. If you were poor, you paid a penny, but had to stand to watch the performance. Richer patrons could pay for seats with a roof to protect them from the elements. At their height, the playhouses were putting on 30-40 plays a year and giving six performances a week. The writers attached to each one would have been very busy indeed.

Elizabethan audience snippets:

- The audience did not sit quietly like we do today; they would talk, laugh and eat during a performance. They would talk back to the actors and make it known if they were not enjoying themselves.
- Good actors were known for having a voice that could be heard above the racket.
- Very rich theatre goers would pay to sit on the stage itself to watch the performance - it must have been very off-putting for the actors.
- Despite its popularity, the theatre was considered to be quite disreputable and the noblewomen who attended often wore masks to disguise their appearance.
- The poorer audience members who stood up were known as 'groundlings'.
- The groundlings often had wine, food or even spit land on their heads from the richer people in the seats above them.



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Over to You

Wednesday Reading task:

1. What is another word for a group of actors?
2. How many female actors were there in Elizabethan times?
3. Why were travelling actors banned?
4. Why did performances take place in the afternoon?
5. Why would the writers attached to each theatre have been very busy?

Thursday Writing Task:

Imagine you have travelled back in time and have landed in an Elizabethan theatre during a performance. Write a diary entry to describe what you saw. Use the work you did for your starter to help you to talk about what is different about the theatre/cinema of today and the theatre in Shakespeare's time.



Poetic Justice

Write a rhyming poem five lines long
that sums up today's lesson!



Old theatre was our topic today,
We learned women weren't allowed in a play.
The audience was rude,
Throwing their food
And insisting on having their say.

