

ENGLISH THEATRE IN THE RENAISSANCE

Author Unknown

- I. Drama began in Middle Ages in Europe in church -- one way to reach illiterate masses
 - A. Eventually plays began to incorporate secular (non- religious) aspects and church withdrew support
 - B. Professional acting companies soon sprang up in 1500's
 1. Considered lower class citizens
 2. Traveled from town to town performing on makeshift platform stages -- no real scenery
 3. When in London, performed in courtyards of inns (hotels)
 - C. Acting companies got support of Queen Elizabeth and aristocracy became patrons
 1. Companies named after their supporter such as the Lord Chamberlain's Men
- II. This led to construction of first permanent theatre buildings since ancient Roman times
 - A. Located outside city limits to avoid interference with civil authorities and reduce outbreaks of plague
 - B. First one built in 1576 -- called The Theatre; later taken down and set up in different location and renamed The Globe
- III. Elizabethan theatre had same basic layout as the courtyards of inns -- even painted like them
 - A. It's what actors knew
 - B. Open air structure -- seat up to 3000
 - C. Round or octagonal in shape -- audience on three sides of stage
 - D. Platform stage juts out into empty yard
 - E. Back wall -- two doors for entrances and exits
 - F. An upper playing area -- balcony
 - G. Two pillars holding up roof over stage called "heavens" and painted with stars
 - H. Audience seated in galleries or stand in front of stage on ground (yard or pit). They were called groundlings.
 - I. Nobility could sit on stage
 - J. Not a quiet place -- vendors, prostitutes, general rowdiness -- like a sports stadium
 1. People often interrupted the play
 - K. In center of back wall was curtained area -- either recessed in or jutting out -- inner stage or discovery space
 - L. Theatres also used for other kinds of entertainment such as bear baiting or bull baiting -- wild dogs rip chained bear/bull to shreds
- IV. Performance Style
 - A. Plays performed in daylight -- 2:00 in the afternoon
 1. Night scenes played under Heavens or symbolized by torches or words
 - B. Audience very close to stage and actors
 1. Development of "aside" -- where character speaks to audience or "soliloquy" -- where character speaks thoughts aloud to himself
 - C. Very little scenery -- all done with descriptive language which is why plays are so wordy
 1. If actor said he was in a forest, audience accepted it -- no need for actual trees
 - D. Two door symbolized different places -- exit out one and enter through other
 1. Example -- ROMEO AND JULIET -- two families use different doors
 2. Had to exit through doors -- if died on stage,

carried off

E. Use of symbolism

1. Synecdoche -- part stands for whole -- few soldiers represent whole army, throne stands for castle of the king
2. Not limiting, but freeing. Not tied to one set designer's vision. Each audience member has different set in his mind.

F. Costumes were contemporary clothing

1. Very fancy -- old clothes of aristocracy
2. Not historically accurate, but fashion of time
3. Like performing a play about the Civil War in modern military uniforms

G. Lines written and spoken in "blank verse" -- unrhymed but metered

1. Iambic Pentameter -- 10 syllables per line, 5 stresses per line
2. Approximates normal speech rhythms
3. Upper class characters spoke in poetry, lower class in prose

H. All parts played by men -- women not allowed to act; teenage boys played female roles

1. Reason for very little physical romance in the plays
2. Strong female characters
3. Women disguised as men plot device
4. Still British tradition (Monty Python)

I. Special effects

1. Winch system to raise and lower things
2. Thunder -- fire cannon or roll cannonball down wooden trough
3. Lightning -- gun powder
4. Trap doors -- under stage, called Hell

J. Many plays also performed in indoor theatres -- especially during winter or in palaces of Queen Elizabeth or King James

1. Large halls lit by candlelight
2. Many of these plays set at night
3. MACBETH one of these?

K. Great love of blood, guts, gore, supernatural

1. Plays very violent -- animal bladders filled with blood under costumes, battered pig's head for chopped off human head
2. Lots of ghosts, witches, spirits -- all believed in at that time

L. Bawdy humor -- plays very sexual

1. Many words had double meanings -- die, green, stand

M. Only one copy of script complete -- held by bookholder (stage manager)

1. Actors got pieces of paper with just their lines and cue words on them

N. Not a lot of stage directions in script -- directions indicated by the lines themselves

1. "Here comes Macbeth" spoken by a character on stage meant Macbeth was to enter