

For hundreds of years, theatre has remained one of the most popular forms of entertainment. In 16th century England, during the reign of Elizabeth I, theatre was easily accessible to the masses and greatly in demand, causing the creation of some of the most beautiful works of dramatic literature, especially the works of William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's plays were performed for thousands of spectators at a time, on stages of variable sizes, in multiple playhouses around London (Cook 175). The particular design of the Elizabethan theater, along with the staging techniques of the time, impacted how Shakespeare's plays were performed and their effect on the audience.

The most prevalent style of playhouse in the 16th century London was an open-air amphitheater. The Rose, for example, was a polygonal amphitheater, made of "timber, with a lath and plaster exterior and thatch roof" ("Elizabethan Theater"). The interior consisted of three stories of galleries and a yard in front of a stage that rested against one side of the theater (see fig. 1). These were characteristics that were consistent with most Elizabethan theaters; however, there were many variations in size: the Rose was around 68 feet in diameter, while the Globe (the theater in which most of Shakespeare's plays were performed) was around 101 feet in diameter ("Elizabethan theater").

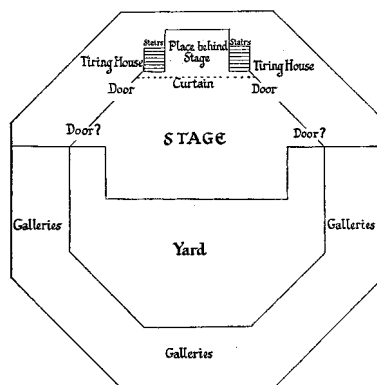


Fig. 1. This is a diagram depicting an octagonal Elizabethan theatre (Chambers 85).

A considerable portion of the theaters was dedicated to housing the audience. Where an audience member was situated determined how much he or she had to pay. Most poor theatergoers only had the option of standing in the yard in front of the stage, costing them one penny (Cook 181). These individuals were called “groundlings,” a reference to both their location in the theater and their terrible behavior (Hackett 40). Concessions were available in the yard, which consisted of “apples, pears, and nuts, as well as wine and ale,” and groundlings who could afford to buy them tended to disrupt performances with either the loud cracking of the nuts or throwing their food onto the stage (Cook 197). For those of higher class who could afford better (and actual) seating, the price increased by one penny according to which story they sat in (Eccles 181-182). The most expensive seats in the house were in the gallery directly above the stage, called the “lords’ room,” where the wealthy paid sixpence to exhibit their wealth, but had absolutely no view of the action below them (Hackett 35). Altogether, most Elizabethan theaters could hold up to 3,000 people (Cook 175). The capacity of these playhouses demonstrated just how popular the theater really was and how profitable it could be— if a theater showed a play once a week with a decent audience, the profits could equate to about “£10 to £12” a day, or “£2000” a year (Cook 209).

The stage itself was the centerpiece of the Elizabethan theater. Although most theaters shared many of the same physical qualities, the stage was the most dynamic in its design. There is a great variety in the actual sizes of Elizabethan stages. For example, the stage at the Globe was “43 feet in width [and] 27 feet in depth” while the stage at the Rose was far smaller, only “36 feet 9 inches” in width and “16 feet 5 inches” in depth (“Elizabethan Theater;” Eccles 92). However, the height of the stage was very consistent

between theaters, at around 5.5 feet tall (Arnott 169). This allowed for the “groundlings” to have a somewhat adequate view of the action on stage, as well as enough room below the stage for actors to access the trapdoor (Arnott 169). Trapdoors were a fairly necessary design feature for the stage because most plays had no form of a set, and a trapdoor can symbolize anything from a hole, the ocean, or Hell (Rhodes 14). Above the stage was a “protective canopy,” which was used both to shield the actors from the elements as well as symbolize heaven with various decorations (Arnott 167). On stage, there would be multiple openings, allowing actors to go backstage to the tiring house. The tiring house was where actors could change their costumes, play the music needed for the shows, and access the stairs to get to the upper level above the stage (Hackett 6, 12). The three sections of the stage (the trapdoor, the stage, and the canopy) played a very important role in Elizabethan theater: they symbolized “the heavens above, the world below, and hell beneath” (Rhodes 14).

All of these aspects of the Elizabethan theater, especially the stage, affected the way plays were produced. When Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* was performed at the Rose in 1594, decisions had to be made in order to successfully stage one of Shakespeare’s most theatrically complicated and gruesome plays (Metz 154-155). The production had to work with both the limitations of the Rose itself and the seriously difficult obstacles the play presents that are still problematic to today’s standards.

A major difficulty in performing *Titus Andronicus* was the limitation of the Rose’s small stage. In the very first scene, there are three different settings for the action: the streets of Rome, the Andronici tomb, and the Senate house. Luckily, this proves to not be so problematic due the upper level of the Rose’s stage. In the stage directions it

reads that Saturninus and Bassianus “go up into the Senate house,” suggesting they most likely went through one of the numerous exits on the stage, went up the stairs from the tiring room, and walked up onto the upper level (see fig. 2) as the setting switched to the Andronici tomb where Titus brings Tamora and her sons (1.1.63). In Act 2, Scene 3, the characters Quintus and Martius fall into a pit, where they find the bloody remains of Bassianus. This stage direction allows for effective use of the trapdoor found in the Rose’s stage, which most likely had a stagehand underneath to open the door in order for the actor playing Martius to swiftly fall in, an effect that would have caught the audience by pleasant surprise. It appears that Shakespeare was quite keen on shaping the action of his plays around the theaters of the time.

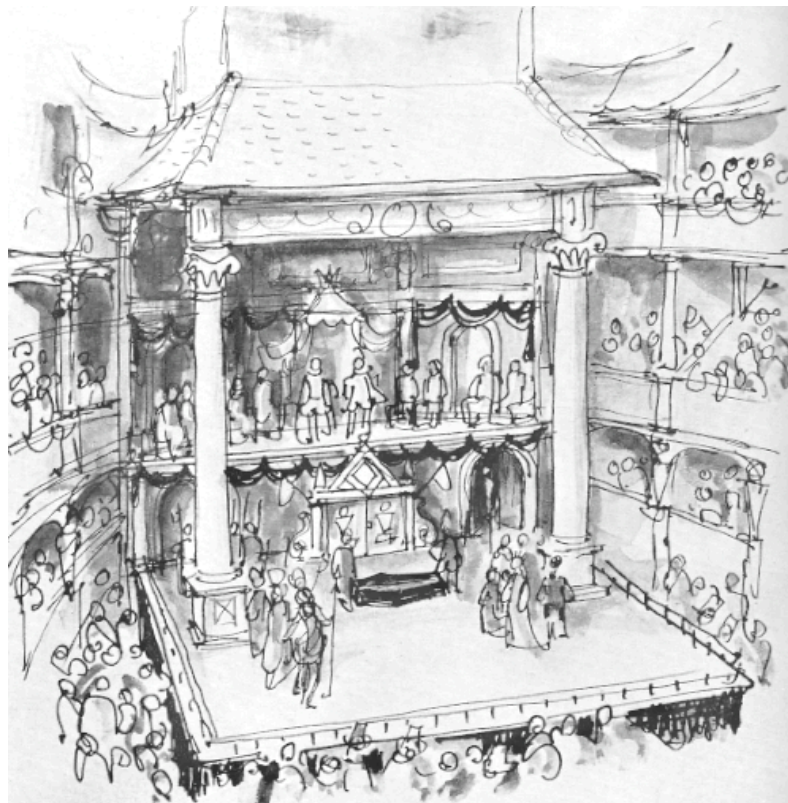


Fig. 2. This sketch demonstrates how utilizing the upper level above the stage can assist in displaying the different settings in Act 1, Scene 1 (Hodges 114).

However, there were aspects of the theater that were just unavoidable and had to be worked around. Because the Rose was an open-air amphitheater, the only source of light was the sun, which meant that plays could only be played during the day, most commonly at 2 pm or 3pm (Cook 173). This called for two separate actions: Shakespeare had to incorporate the time of day into the dialogue of the characters, and the audience had to suspend their disbelief in order to believe the show. In Act 5, Scene 2, Tamora arrives at Titus's house dressed up as "Revenge." It is not until Titus mentions the "heavy night" that the audience knows the time in which the scene takes place (5.2.24). However, it is the tension of the scene that the audience would have been concentrating on, instead of focusing on the time of day.

The physical demonstration of time may not be considered as challenging as the demonstration of setting and culture. In traditional Shakespearean staging, the stage was quite bare, lacking any form of a set; it was meant to be "formal rather than illusionistic" (Kernodle 318). As with the time of day, the location of the scenes relied on Shakespeare including it with his characters' dialogue. The most common technique of displaying where the play took place and who the characters were was through the use of costumes. It would have been expected for all of the characters in *Titus Andronicus* to be dressed as Romans. However, only Titus is dressed in traditional Roman garb, as shown in Henry Peacham's drawing of Act 1, Scene 1 (see fig. 3). This figure is not proven to be from the exact time of the early performances of *Titus Andronicus*, but it is a clue to how costuming was either done or considered. The decision to use Elizabethan clothing drawing could have been made for several reasons. Perhaps due to the funding for costumes, it was not of large importance that every character be dressed in period-correct



Fig. 3. Peacham's drawing shows that only Titus appears in tradition Roman garb, while the other characters are dressed in Elizabethan apparel (Rhodes 61).

costumes. Since Titus is the protagonist of the play, perhaps those who made the decision thought it was only truly necessary for him to wear a toga, and the other characters could be identified without difficulty even if they were wearing Elizabethan clothing. This may be considered a confusing choice, but seeing Tamora dressed in royal Elizabethan clothing would have easily communicated with audiences that she was of some form of royalty, even if it was of the ancient Roman period.

The most difficult detail that was necessary to be shown correctly on stage was mutilated figure of Lavinia. Showing the aftermath of Chiron and Demetrius' terrible act would most likely have created a complicated problem for the production in 1594. How could the actor playing Lavinia, as all female parts were played by male actors, be shown with bleeding stumps and a tongue-less mouth? The solution, although repulsive, would have actually been quite simple. Because Lavinia's rape in Act 2 is not seen on stage, the actor had enough time to prepare his costume. A common technique in Elizabethan theatre for stage wounds was to use "concealed [animal] bladders [and] sponges" which would have been filled with the animal blood (Kirschbaum 517). With the assistance of

another person, the actor would only have to have wrapped either a soaked sponge or filled bladder in his hands, completely concealing them, and then place a smaller, soaked sponge inside his mouth before going onstage for Act 2, Scene 4 when Marcus finds Lavinia. By squeezing and biting the sponges, the actor would have been able to produce the spectacular, gory effect of bleeding on stage, which would have amazed audiences.

Staging a production of a complicated show such as *Titus Andronicus* would have definitely imposed some difficulties in the late 16th century. But the design of the theaters played a great role in formation of the plays. The plays were of course written to effectively present the story, but the limitations of the theater were always taken into account when judging what was or was not possible to perform. Things that could not be shown were described with words. Physical injuries were presented using very simplistic techniques. When it comes to the beautifully intricate works of William Shakespeare, there is no need to have marble columns on stage in order to present Rome. The words themselves showed the audience all they needed to see, and simple stage techniques made the illusion all the more enjoyable.