

Shakespeare's Theatre



The modern reconstruction of the Globe Theatre, in London

Source:

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0d/Globe_Galleries.JPG

What would a trip to the theatre have been like in Shakespeare's day? Firstly, it would have cost a good deal of money. Groundlings paid a penny for entrance – for many this would have been nearly a whole day's wages! Groundlings would stand in the area in front of the stage whilst in the tiers there were benches or seats. Seats in the tiers cost from tuppence up to four pence.

Theatres at that time were open air and 'lit' by daylight. Seats in the galleries were covered by a thatched roof, and most of the stage was also covered. If it rained the groundlings got wet! Despite this inconvenience and the cost it is estimated that theatres such as The Globe held up to 2,500 people.

The crowd would have expected, and got, spectacle. There would have been musicians, sound effects, disappearances or appearances through trap doors or even via a pulley system from the 'heavens'. (The heavens was the name for the roof over the stage). Underneath the hollow apron stage (so called because it stuck out into the audience like an apron) stagehands could create other sound effects.

A big difference between Shakespeare's theatre and modern theatre is that they used fewer props and no 'scenery'. (However, some of the props were on a grand scale, the players once used a real cannon with disastrous results – it caught the thatched roof alight!) If the actors wanted to let the audience know they were now in a 'desolate place near Forres' they had to tell them that, or make it very evident by their actions. Similarly, if it was meant to be night time, the actors would have to show this – by their words and actions. For instance at the beginning of Macbeth Act 2 Scene 1 (the dagger scene) Banquo's first words to Fleance are "How goes the night, boy?" In Act 3 Scene IV (the banqueting scene) Macbeth asks Lady Macbeth "What is the night?" To which she replies "Almost at odds with morning, which is which". The audience are able to follow the timescale of the play and also pick up on the events associated with night and evil.

Act 3 Scene IV (the banquet scene) would have required that two thrones and a table for the guests be placed on stage. Everything that went on or came off the stage would have been seen by the audience as there were no curtains around the stage. It is likely that music would have been played to give the stagehands a chance to prepare the stage and set the scene for the grand entrance of Macbeth and his wife. Many of Shakespeare's plays had a grand procession scene where the actors would have paraded their fine costumes to fanfares from the musicians. They may either have appeared from one of the doors on stage or perhaps through the crowd and up stairs onto the stage. (Imagine the effect of such a gorgeous and glittering spectacle on the 'groundlings'). This scene is also a chance for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to show off their power and position. As Lady Macbeth says it is the 'ceremony' that the guests have come for, not the meal ("To feed were best at home").

At either side of the stage were two pillars that supported the stage roof. These were useful 'hiding places' or places for 'observing' away from the main acting area of the stage. It could be that the 'First Murderer' in the banquet scene waited by the pillars to catch Macbeth's attention unseen by the other guests.

Whilst actors in Shakespeare's time used fewer props they certainly had some bloody special effects up their sleeves (or in their jackets)! Pigs' bladders were filled with blood and sewn up – ready to be pierced by the point of a dagger! When Macbeth says to Banquo's ghost "Thou canst not say I did it; never shake thy gory locks at me", the ghost of Banquo could, quite literally, have been covered in blood. A horrific contrast to the well-dressed royals and lords around him.



Shakespeare's theatre was spectacular, exciting, thrilling and crammed full of people from all walks of life. The audience went to be entertained, to be transported to somewhere far from their everyday experience.

**The stage of the modern
Globe Theatre.**

Source:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Globe_theatre_stage.jpg