



Macbeth and Shakespeare's Theater

Scene from *Macbeth*, performed by the Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival, 2004

The Scottish Play Say the name Macbeth backstage within earshot of actors taking part in a production of the play and you will probably be told to leave the theater, spin around three times, spit on the ground, and then ask for permission to return. Superstition holds that the play is cursed; even pronouncing its name backstage is supposed to bring bad luck. For that reason, cast and crew often refer to it as “the Scottish play” or “that play.” Accidents and injuries (particularly sword wounds) have plagued productions of *Macbeth* throughout the play’s 400-year history. The misfortunes seem to have begun with the very first performance in 1606, when the actor (a boy—more about that later) playing Lady Macbeth died backstage. Shakespeare himself had to step into the role.

The Globe Theater The first performance of *Macbeth* was held before King James at Hampton Court Palace. However, in Shakespeare’s time most plays were performed in outdoor public theaters. These theaters resembled courtyards, with the stage surrounded on three sides by tall raised galleries. The best-known of these theaters in London was the Globe, where Shakespeare and his acting company performed.

The Globe was a three-story wooden structure that could hold as many as 3,000 people. Plays were performed on a platform stage in the theater’s center. The poorer patrons, or “groundlings,” stood around the stage to watch the performance. Wealthier patrons sat in the covered galleries.

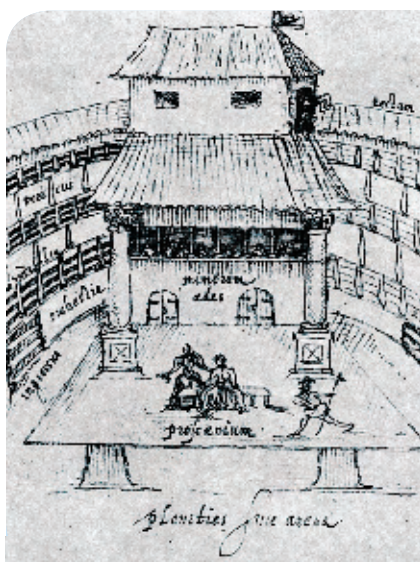
Because the Globe was an open-air theater, performers had to depend on natural lighting for illumination. But Shakespeare found creative ways to work with the natural light. When *Macbeth* was performed at the Globe, audiences were probably struck by the sight in Act Five, Scene 1, of Lady Macbeth pacing around the stage with a candle. By that point in the play, the eerie scene would probably have been effective because the natural light may well have dimmed.



The Players Actors worked in close proximity to the groundlings, who stood around the stage, eating and drinking. If they disapproved of certain characters or lines, they would let the actors know by jeering or even throwing food. The large crowds also attracted pickpockets and other rough elements. The rowdiness of the audiences and the location of theaters near taverns and other unsavory establishments gave theaters, and actors, an immoral reputation. Because the theater was viewed as so disreputable, women were not allowed to perform. As with the ill-fated actor who was supposed to play Lady Macbeth in 1606, boys normally played all of the female roles.

The Fate of the Globe In 1613, the Globe's thatched roof caught fire during a performance of *Henry VIII*, and the theater was destroyed. It was quickly rebuilt at the same location, however, this time with a tiled gallery roof. Only 30 years later, Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans shut down the theater, suppressing what they considered a frivolous form of entertainment. But the Globe would rise again. In the 1990s, Shakespeare's theater was rebuilt to the same size and design of the old Globe. Since its official opening in 1997, the new Globe has become one of London's most popular tourist attractions.

THEATER STAGING



This drawing of the Swan theater, left, is one of the few historical sources of information about the design of Elizabethan public theaters. Because of their open-air design, performances could only take place in daylight and in warm weather. The drawing was used to reconstruct Shakespeare's Globe theater, right, in which a Zulu version of *Macbeth* was performed in 1997.



- 1 Though scenery was minimal, audiences still demanded a good show. A trapdoor in the stage led to a space below, from which ghosts—or the witches in *Macbeth*—could emerge.
- 2 The enclosed tower behind the stage offered a place to create sound effects, such as the thunder, drums, and bells heard in *Macbeth*.
- 3 Above the back of the stage and its small balcony was a painted ceiling called “the heavens.” It contained trapdoors for the appearance of angels and spirits from the enclosed tower.
- 4 Props, such as swords and flags, and elaborate costumes added to the display.