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The History of the Elizabethan Theatre

The history of the Elizabethan Theatre started with the wandering minstrels who moved from one castle and town to the next. Any strangers were treated with suspicion during the Elizabethan era, and this also applied to wandering actors, especially when many horrific outbreaks of the Bubonic Plague transpired. The reputations of Elizabethan actors were that of vagabonds and thieves. Travelling throughout the era was restricted, and required a license. Regulations restricting actors soon followed and Licenses were granted to the nobles of England for the maintenance of troupes of players. Thus the Elizabethan Acting Troupes were formed. With the opening of the first English theatre in London, The Red Lion (1567) in Whitechapel by John Brayne, we have, what may be called the systematic beginnings of early modern English drama. This former farm, converted into a single gallery multi-sided theatre; was however a short lived attempt to provide a purpose built play house for the touring theatrical companies of Tudor England. The venture was soon replaced by a more successful collaboration between Brayne and a brother-in-law of his, the actor-manager James Burbage at Shoreditch known as The **Theatre**. The **Red Lion** was a receiving house for touring companies, whereas **The Theatre** accepted long-term engagements, essentially in repertory, with companies being based there. The former was a continuation of the tradition of touring groups, performing at inns and grand houses, the later a radically new form of theatrical engagement. The public theatres had circular arenas, a stage was set at one end of the open courtyard and the auditorium was open to the sky. The private theatres were enclosed halls with the stage lightened by candles, Jumps or torches (plays were given during the night). Either circular or octagonal, the playhouses had three tiers of balconies surrounding the pit, where the stage was set. It was called the “apron stage” due to the platform, which consisted of the front or main stage. There would be a ‘gallery above the upper stage which would serve as a balcony, or to signify walls of cities as part of the setting. Below the gallery were curtains, which were occasionally drawn back so that a rear or inner stage was provided.

The first so to say proper theatre built in London by James Burbage, in 1576, was located outside the city jurisdiction, so the mayor and council had no right concerning the theatre. Soon, another theatre The Curtain was built by Richard Farrant. The Rose, owned by Philip Henslowe, kept the detailed record of all the expenses and sources of income, which are now

an important insight into that time. The Globe, later owned by Shakespeare and Hemminge, was a model for a number of theatres built later on. Usually built of timber, lath and plaster and with thatched roofs, the early theatres were vulnerable to fire, and were replaced (when necessary) with stronger structures. When the Globe burned down in June 1613, it was rebuilt with a tile roof; when the Fortune burned down in December 1621, it was rebuilt in brick (and apparently was no longer square). Around 1580, when both **The Theatre and The Curtain** were full on summer days, the total theatre capacity of London was about 5000 spectators. With the building of new theatre facilities and the formation of new companies, the capital's total theatre capacity exceeded 10,000 after 1610. In 1580, the poorest citizens could purchase admittance to the **Curtain** or the **Theatre** for a penny; in 1640, their counterparts could gain admittance to the **Globe**, the Cockpit, or the **Red Bull**—for exactly the same price. Ticket prices at the private theatres were however five or six times higher at this time.

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