

Historical Background

There has been a lot of research into who visited Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and other theatres in London. Theatre-going was a popular activity in this period of history with at least 20 performance spaces in London in Shakespeare's lifetime (outdoor like the Globe, indoor like the Blackfriars Theatre and a number of inns which specialised in performances). On the whole the social spectrum of attendance was wider than it is today although, unlike in the film *Shakespeare In Love*, the Queen never visited the public playhouses herself, she didn't need to as the actors performed for her in court.

In 1599 Thomas Platter visited the Globe and made a note about the entry prices in his diary

"Whoever cares to stand below pays only one English penny, but if he wishes to sit he enters by another door and pays another penny, while if he desires to sit in the most comfortable seats which are cushioned, where he not only sees everything well but can also be seen then he pays yet another English penny at another door".

So admission varied from 1 penny to 3 pennies. The 1 penny entry to the Globe Theatre put it on a par with the bear-baiting pit next door which also cost a single penny for standing room close to the action. Bear-baiting was a blood sport in which you placed bets on bears versus dogs. It was one of the main competitors for the theatre and it was located just opposite Shakespeare's Globe. Both were situated on the south bank of the river away from the more respectable areas of London.

The theatre map in the game is based upon a drawing of the Swan Theatre by a Dutch tourist called De Witt. There is no historical drawing of the interior of Shakespeare's Globe, but the basic set up was thought to be similar to that of the Swan Theatre, although the Swan Theatre would have been a little old-fashioned compared to the Globe Theatre, which had more sophisticated stage mechanisms including a trap door, a hoist and the 'discovery space' (a large alcove which could be screened off between the entrance and exit doors).

The best seats were the so-called 'Lords Boxes' above and almost behind the stage – these were the best seats because acoustically you would hear well from there, but also because you could be seen by the other audience members.

Many of the people who Nicholas seats were real people who we know visited at least one of the London theatres during this period. These historical details are taken from Andrew Gurr's excellent book *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* as follows:

Edmond (Ned) Chambers – A waterman fined for assault and battery of Martin Slater [one of the players] outside the Curtain Theatre. He was fined for making an affray, but Martin was fined for beating and wounding Edmund.



William George – His purse containing ten shillings was picked by three men (Harrison, Holdaye and Staple) at the Curtain Theatre in August of 1613.

John Howe – A barber surgeon who went to see a play 'The Old Joiner of Aldgate' about a similar man, a character perhaps based on him called 'snipper-snapper'

William George's wife – She is actually made up, but it is certain that women did visit the theatre along with their husbands or groups of friends, even if ministers did discourage men from taking wives to the theatre in case they learned the art of lying!

Hazelnut seller – Again she is fictitious, but it is certain that refreshments were available inside the theatre. Excavations of the Globe Theatre revealed a lot of hazelnut shells on the floor of the yard. For many years these were thought to be shells discarded by the patrons, but recent thinking is that they may have been deliberately laid as a 'non slip' surface.

Sir Christopher Blount – Younger brother of the Earl of Devonshire. He fought in the Netherlands and at Cadiz and in Ireland with the Earl of Essex, his stepson. He was a Catholic rebel and secret agent. He went with other conspirators to the Globe Theatre on 7 February 1601 to see Shakespeare's *Richard II*. He was executed on the 18 March that year.

Sir Christopher was part of the so-called 'Essex rebellion'. The Earl of Essex had been a favourite of Queen Elizabeth's until he disobeyed her orders to fight in Ireland and returned to find himself under house arrest. Once released he was left with a grudge against the Queen. He gathered a number of supporters and paid the Globe Theatre to stage a performance of *Richard II* which he hoped would encourage his supporters towards rebellion. *Richard II* is the story of a weak king who loses the throne in part by listening to advice from the wrong people and Essex knew that people would see parallels between *Richard II* and Queen Elizabeth. However on the morning after the play, when Essex and his supporters marched to the palace to force an audience with the Queen, Essex was arrested as a traitor, imprisoned and later executed.

Because of their power to incite people en masse, plays were considered slightly dangerous by the authorities and all plays performed at the large public play houses were subject to censorship by the Master of the Revels. His main job was to be sure that plays were not treasonous and likely to incite the public to rebel. They were less concerned with the things we might censor today such as sexual jokes, swear words or potentially offensive content. This is one reason why there were very few plays overtly, at least, about current affairs. It was very dangerous to be accused of treason, as traitors were generally executed so playwrights were usually pretty careful what they wrote about.

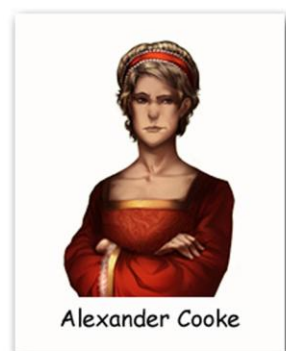


Game One

The theatre was a restless place. Plays in the public amphitheatres such as the Globe Theatre generally started at about 2pm and ran for about two hours. When a play was scheduled for that afternoon handwritten 'flyers' were posted about town and the theatre flew a flag to alert the public on the other side of the river. Once your entry fee was paid you were admitted to the appropriate area but no 'seat' was allocated and audience members jostled for the best views standing or sitting on benches or craning over the galleries. Refreshments were sold throughout the performance – there was no interval – by sellers moving amongst the patrons. The audience responded physically and vocally to the play applauding, calling out, heckling and responding to the questions asked by the actors (which we now perform as rhetorical questions only). Play-goers often commented that they heard only part of the play at any one time, but would return until they felt they had understood the whole play.

Later in Shakespeare's career, indoor playhouses also began to offer so-called 'private' performances of plays including Shakespeare's. Shakespeare's company owned an indoor playhouse at Blackfriars. The indoor playhouses still performed in a thrust stage space with the audience on benches at floor level on three sides and in elevated galleries above. These playhouses charged significantly more for entrance than the 'public' play houses, although if you could afford to go they were really just as public as the outdoor theatres.

There is a surprising amount of debate about the issue of 'public toilets' but it does not seem likely that the Globe Theatre had any facilities - patrons simply 'nipped outside' and returned to their place as far as anyone can tell.



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