

The Globe: Shakespeare's Theatre [C1]

Chissà cosa si provava ad assistere a un'opera di Shakespeare diretta da lui stesso? Il Globe Theatre, fedelmente ricostruito come nel XVII secolo, offre l'opportunità di rivivere questa straordinaria esperienza.

William Shakespeare died in 1616 and the Globe Theatre in London, where Shakespeare's acting company performed many of his plays, was pulled down in 1644. But, thanks to the vision of American actor Sam Wanamaker, a replica theatre called Shakespeare's Globe now stands close to the original site on the South Bank next to the River Thames. Like the original, this theatre, which opened in 1997, is almost circular and open to the sky in the middle. The design is as close as possible to the original but incorporates important modern features like electricity. Every year thousands of people get the chance to see innovative productions of Shakespeare's plays in this unusual setting.

A TERRIBLE FIRE

Today's replica is, in fact, the third Globe theatre. The first Globe was built in 1599 close to the current site but it burnt down completely after a fire started during a performance in 1613. It was replaced with the second Globe in 1614. Back in the early 1600s, this area, known as Bankside, was vibrant and had lots of different entertainment venues, from gambling houses to brothels and bear-baiting arenas. Because Bankside was outside the city of London, it was easier for Shakespeare to get a licence to perform plays there. Two other theatres, the Rose Theatre and the Swan Theatre, were already close by. Shakespeare's theatre company which, at the time, was called The Lord Chamberlain's Men, decided to build their own theatre in Bankside after being blocked from performing at a theatre built specially for them in Blackfriars, north of the river. It's said that they secretly deconstructed the Blackfriars Theatre and transported the timbers across the Thames to construct the new roofless Globe Theatre.

A BUSINESS VENTURE

Dr. Hanh Bui is the Teaching and [Research Fellow](#) at Shakespeare's Globe. She talks about the historical context of the original Globe Theatre, what it was like to see a play there in the early 1600s, and what it's like for audiences today. Dr. Bui begins by telling us how important the first Globe Theatre was as a business venture for Shakespeare and his theatre company. **Dr. Hanh Bui (American accent):** Building their own theatre gave the company greater control over their performance space, over their financial operations, and this was a really huge advantage. So key members of the acting company, including Shakespeare, were [shareholders](#) in the theatre, which meant that instead of paying rent, they [split](#) the [profits](#), and this incentivised them to manage the theatre efficiently. And it was this type of venture that helped make Shakespeare a relatively rich man before the end of his career.

GREAT SUCCESS

The first Globe Theatre was extremely successful and many of Shakespeare's best-known plays were performed there: Henry V, Julius Caesar, As You Like It, Hamlet, Measure for Measure, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, and Antony and Cleopatra. In fact, the Globe Theatre did so well that in 1603 King James I became [patron](#) of the theatre company, which then changed its name from The Lord Chamberlain's Men to the King's Men. Dr. Bui talks about how audiences experienced plays at the Globe Theatre in Shakespeare's time. **Dr. Hanh Bui:** The original Globe could [hold](#) about two thousand, maybe three thousand people. We don't really know for sure. Today we can accommodate about half that many people, sixteen hundred people, seven hundred of whom are standing in the [yard](#). [Hence](#), these audience members were called '[yardlings](#)' or 'groundlings' in Shakespeare's day. They were also called 'understanders' because they stood underneath the stage that was approximately five feet high [1.52 metres]. And so if you could imagine people [crowded](#) all around three sides of the stage. You also had very wealthy audience members sitting above the stage in the area that's commonly called the [balcony](#) or the musicians' gallery.

MODERN EXPERIENCES

The design of the Globe Theatre had an impact on the way plays were performed, as Dr. Bui explains. The experience for modern audiences is similar in many ways. **Dr. Hanh Bui:** Actors had to keep moving to make sure the maximum number of people can [could] see and hear them. And that's going to bring a whole different energy to a performance. And the fact that performances also took place during the day means that actors and audiences could fully see each other. It wasn't the situation where the audience was sitting in darkness with a spotlight trained on the stage. And so this also has a huge effect on audience interaction and behaviour. And so a defining feature of Globe performance is this relationship between actors and audience. People feel more at liberty to talk back to actors and respond to what they see and hear on the stage, while actors often address the audience as extensions of the play world, incorporate the audience as members of the crowd or the plebeians or whatnot. So in Shakespeare's day, going to see a play at an outdoor theatre was much more like going to a football game than going to the opera. You know, it was loud, it was smelly, it was crowded, people moved around and they didn't hesitate to let the actors on stage know if they didn't like what they were seeing.

A MULTI-SIDED BUILDING

The physical structure of the Globe is very different from a typical proscenium arch theatre. Dr. Bui describes its unusual shape, what materials it was built from, and how the space affects the experience of watching a play there. **Dr. Hanh Bui:** The Globe is not a perfect circle, but it's actually kind of a multi-sided building. We think twenty sides, but other scholars have argued twenty-two sides, twenty-four sides. But the number of sides gave it a circular or rounded appearance. And we think that it was about a hundred feet in diameter on the outside of the building. It was a timber-framed building, meaning it was made out of wood with outer walls made of lime plaster. And it had three levels of gallery seating all around. There was a thatched roof covering the stage and the galleries, but it was open to the sky, meaning there was no roof over the central yard. And what this allowed was sunlight to light up the theatre for daytime performances. There was a

large platform stage, we think around forty to fifty feet [12.19-15.24 metres] wide and approximately twenty feet [6.1 metres] deep, that [jutted out](#) into the middle of the [yard](#). And this [thrust stage](#) means there was no proscenium arch or curtain to separate the audience from the actors.

TRAPDOORS

Dr. Bui describes what the stage of the Globe looked like in Shakespeare's time and how actors used trapdoors in the roof and floor to make dramatic entrances and exits. Similar tricks are still used in plays performed at Shakespeare's Globe today. **Dr. Hanh Bui:** There was a roof over the stage called the Heavens because it was painted with celestial images like sun, moon, and stars. And this roof was [held up](#) by two giant pillars. And above the roof, there was a little area called the [Hut](#). And this area had [ropes](#) and a pulley system to lower and raise actors through a trapdoor in the roof. There was another trapdoor in the stage that led to an area under the stage called Hell. So if you have a Heavens, then you need a Hell. And this was a fabulous entrance and exit for demonic or ghostly figures.

THE 1997 GLOBE

The vision for Shakespeare's Globe was to achieve the most authentic reconstruction possible without sacrificing modern comforts and safety. Dr. Bui told us this has been done. **Dr. Hanh Bui:** The builders of our modern Globe attempted to replicate the first Globe as much as possible. Now, not just the design, but the building materials and construction methods. So the [oak](#) timber was [sourced](#) all over the UK. Each [beam](#) was hand cut in workshops and then [assembled on-site](#) using something like twelve thousand [hand-carved](#) wooden [pegs](#). But of course, our modern reconstruction has many concessions, modern-day concessions, like electric lights, additional exits for fire and safety, [sprinklers](#) hidden in the [thatched roof](#), toilets, a gift shop... And so it's very much a part of our [ethos](#) here that while it's a reconstruction of a theatre that existed four hundred years ago, we are not [stuck](#) in the past.

Glossary

- **bear-baiting** = tormento dell'orso
- **trained** = indirizzare
- **outer walls** = pareti esterne
- **jutted out** = sporgere
- **on-site** = sul posto
- **pegs** = chiodi
- **venues** = spazi
- **roofless** = senza tetto
- **patron** = mecenate
- **yard** = cortile
- **ethos** = etica
- **stands** = erigersi
- **features** = caratteristiche
- **close by** = vicino
- **Research Fellow** = ricercatrice
- **hold** = contenere
- **ropes** = corde
- **sourced** = ottenere
- **pulled down** = demolire
- **brothels** = bordelli
- **split** = dividere
- **hesitate** = esitare
- **thatched roof** = tetto di paglia
- **thrust stage** = palcoscenico aperto
- **stuck** = bloccati
- **profits** = guadagni
- **spotlight** = riflettore
- **behaviour** = comportamento
- **held up** = sostenere
- **assembled** = montare
- **shareholders** = azionisti
- **Hence** = per questo
- **crowded** = ammassarsi

- **or whatnot** = o quello che è
- **oak** = quercia
- **sprinklers** = irrigatori
- **gambling houses** = case da gioco
- **balcony** = galleria
- **lime plaster** = intonaco di calce
- **timbers** = travi di legno
- **timber-framed** = con struttura in legno
- **Hut** = baracca
- **beam** = trave
- **hand-carved** = scolpito a mano