



**Acting 1 & 2 (Introductory Acting)**  
*Shakespeare & Elizabethan Theatre*  
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**Learning Objective:**

The student will be introduced to Shakespeare & Elizabethan Theatre.

**Bell Ringer:**

Have you ever read or watched a play by Shakespeare? Which one? Did you enjoy it?

**Lesson Steps:**

**Read the article below and take notes. You will take a quiz after you have read it.**

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-on-Avon, England, in 1564. His father, John Shakespeare, was a successful glove-maker and merchant who rose through various administrative offices to become mayor of Stratford. Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, came from a well-to-do landowning family. He attended the Stratford Grammar School, which was noted for the excellent education it provided. In 1582 Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway; the couple had three children, one of whom died at the age of 11.

By 1594 Shakespeare was established in London, where he became a shareholder in the acting company known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later the King's Men. In 1599 his company built a new theatre called The Globe. When the company purchased Blackfriars Theatre in 1608, Shakespeare was also a shareholder. He did do some acting – even appearing before Queen Elizabeth I – but his major contribution was as playwright. He is credited with 37 plays. In addition he wrote some nondramatic poetry, notably a sequence of 154 sonnets.

During the theatrical season he lived in London while his family remained in Stratford. His connection with stage was a profitable one: by 1597 he was wealthy enough to purchase New Place, the second largest house in Stratford. Around 1610 he retired to Stratford, journeying to London as necessary to

take care of theatrical business. Shakespeare died in 1616 and was buried in Trinity Church, Stratford, where he had been baptized 52 years earlier.

It was not the custom of the time to publish plays; generally they were the property of the acting company for which they had been written. Elizabethan printing was often of poor quality, and it seems unlikely that Shakespeare supervised the printing of any of his plays. This accounts for the many misprints and differences from one printing to another that are found in his works. After his death, two friends and members of his acting company collected 36 of his plays together in the First Folio, published in 1623.

Popular and admired in his time, Shakespeare was less esteemed by the neoclassical writers of the late 1600s and 1700s. He was rediscovered in the 1800s and has been revered ever since – sometimes excessively, an attitude referred to as “bardolatry,” after the nickname bestowed upon him, “the bard,” an antiquated term for a writer. Today he is generally acknowledged as the greatest playwright in the English language. His characters in such plays as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *The Tempest* are some of the most vital and fascinating fictional people ever created.

Shakespeare wrote most of his plays for his acting company’s own theatre, The Globe. There was not one Globe, but two: when the first burned down in 1613 a new theatre was promptly erected on the same spot. The new Globe was torn down in 1644, after the Puritan government closed all the theatres, and no contemporary picture of either theatre is known to exist.

What is known is that it was open to the sky, apparently having evolved from temporary stages set up in courtyards of inns earlier in the century. It was a many-sided structure, with an outside diameter of 84 feet. Inside, three galleries surrounded an open area called the Pit, which provided standing room for theatre-goers who couldn’t afford gallery seats – and therefore called “groundlings.” One estimate is that The Globe could accommodate an audience of about 2,000.

Plays were held in the afternoon because no artificial lights were used. There was no scenery, one permanent structure called The Tiring House served as background for all scenes. The main acting area was a thrust stage that jutted out into The Pit. This platform contained trapdoors that might be used for special appearance and disappearances. The main stage entrances were large doors at either side. At the back was a curtained recess known as The Study that might be used for interior scenes. A balcony called the Tarras provided another acting area, and this may have been flanked by windows at which actors could also appear. The stage was covered by a large canopy supported by architectural pillars. After much planning and research, a reconstruction of The Globe opened in London in 1997 to continue the tradition of performing Shakespeare's plays for new generations of theatregoers.

In Shakespeare's day both male and female roles were played by men; most actors performed in contemporary costumes, with little attempt at period authenticity. For the wealthy, Elizabethan dress meant luxurious materials in a wide range of colors and textures, trimmed with jewels, embroidery, fur, or lace.

Male costumes featured doublets – short jackets that ordinarily open up the front, with a standing neckband, and often a short shaped skirt. The waistband came just about the hips and was pointed in front. Shirts worn underneath were revealed only by their collars and cuffs. A striking and characteristic feature was the ruff, which stood out from the top of the high neckband and was pleated or supported by wire or cardboard to extend from four to nine inches. Under their doublets men wore breeches, short trousers puffed out or padded and reaching mid-thigh or just about the knees. Long stockings and shoes with thick soles but no heels completed the picture. Later these shoes might be decorated with large puffs of ribbon. Hair was worn generally short, and even young men wore beards, often neatly trimmed to a point.

The most notable element of female costumes was the farthingale, a hoop that extended the hips greatly – sometimes as much as three or four feet. From this fell a voluminous skirt, sometimes draped or cut in front to reveal an underskirt in a different color or fabric. In contrast, tops were tight, flat

across the chest, and long-waisted, with a point in front. Underneath, corsets with stays of bone or wood helped create the waspish waists and flat chest thought fashionable. Women, like men, wore ruffs at the neck or sometimes wired to rise behind the head.

Women's hats were copies of men's. Fashionable women affected a small hat perched jauntily on their stiffly dressed hair. Women's shoes were like men's but made of rich materials. When they had heels, they were wide, clumsy, and not particularly high. Chains, earrings, brooches, and finger rings were worn in great profusion by both men and women.

Experiments in the newly reconstructed Globe theatre demonstrate that an actor standing in the middle of the thrust stage can be seen and heard everywhere in the house without shouting lines or exaggeration gestures; but Shakespeare wrote famous lines of advice for Hamlet to give a troop of actors, warning them not to "mouth" their speeches nor "saw the air" with their hands, but to "use all gently," so it's probable that acting styles of the day contained some of these excesses. Even so, Shakespeare's plays were never acted in his lifetime with the naturalness that was to come centuries later. For one thing, many of Shakespeare's plays were written in verse, either rhymed or unrhymed. Actors trained in classical methods learned to declaim the verse in a way to emphasize its poetry, but it's not necessary to read Shakespeare's verse as verse in order for the beauty of his language to come through.

## Practice:

Take the quiz below to check your understanding of the article. Then, check your answers with the key.

For each item in the first column, choose the correct description from the second column. Write the letter of the description you choose in the blank. Not all of the descriptions will be used.

- |                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| _____ 1. Groundling   | a) a hoop under a woman's skirt  |
| _____ 2. Doublet      | b) in the Globe theatre, an open area surrounded by galleries                    |
| _____ 3. Farthingale  | c) a type of shoe worn by men or women   |
| _____ 4. Ruff         | d) in the Globe theatre, an audience member who has not purchased a gallery seat |
| _____ 5. Tiring House | e) in the Globe theatre, a structure that serves as a background                 |
| _____ 6. Pit          | f) a man's short jacket  |
|                       | g) a wide, stiff collar supported by wire or cardboard                           |

For each of the following, write "True" if the statement is true and "False" if the statement is false.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Shakespeare's plays were widely published during his lifetime.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. In Shakespeare's time there were few women actors.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. The original Globe theatre is still standing.

## Answers

1. D
2. F
3. A
4. G
5. E
6. B
7. False
8. True
9. False