

## 7 The Wooden O

The first public theatre in London was built for James Burbage in Shoreditch and opened in 1576. It was simply called the *Theatre*. Others quickly followed; the *Rose* at Southwark, the *Swan* in Paris Gardens and *St Paul's Playhouse*, but the most famous theatre of all, the *Globe*, was opened in 1599. It had been commissioned by Richard Burbage who was following in his father's footsteps.

Compared with standing around a collection of wagons, the theatres must have seemed very luxurious indeed to the audiences of London. The actors, too, no longer had to worry if they would be allowed to perform at the next town or whether their wagons would survive until the end of the tour. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the new theatres of the city of London still had much more in common with those market squares and inn yards than with today's modern theatres.

*'...can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram  
Within this wooden O the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt?'*

In the opening speech of the play *Henry V* the first character on stage appeals to the audience to let their imaginations carry them from the limits of the 'wooden O' to the battlefields of France. The phrase 'wooden O' gives us a clear picture of the design which was used for these new buildings. They were circular in shape and built from wood. The first Globe theatre had a roof made of thatch covering the galleries. The name 'globe' therefore describes the shape of the building well. What else is suggested by the name 'globe'?

The lively atmosphere of the villages and market places was still there too. The *Globe* could hold up to 3000 people. Many of these would pay a penny to stand. As the apron stage jutted out into the audience, these groundlings, as they were called, were very close to the action. People with more money to spare could sit in one of the three galleries, or even hire a private box. If you wanted to be right in the middle of the action you could pay up to a shilling for a stool on the stage itself.

Performances began at two in the afternoon so that they could be over by the time darkness fell. A trumpet sounded to herald the start of a play and a flag would fly over the theatre.

Food and drink were on sale both before and during the performances. Wine and ale were very popular and fruit, nuts and other foods would also have been available to keep the audience going through the long afternoon.



### Discussion

Consider the information about the theatres very carefully.

- 1 What do you think the atmosphere must have been like during a play?
- 2 What problems might the actors have had to deal with?

*HINT: If you were at a play and you thought the actors were no good what might you do?*

- 3 Without the benefits of modern technology what types of problems did the actors have to overcome?



### Activities

- 1 Put together your poster of the *Globe* theatre (see Appendix 7).

Label the following:

- a The apron stage
- b The flag to show a performance in progress
- c The trap door
- d Musicians gallery
- e A gallery for wealthier people.

Draw and stick on (or simply draw straight on):

- a An ale seller
  - b Several groundlings
  - c A musician in the balcony
  - d Two actors having a duel on stage
  - e A nobleman watching a performance on the stage.
- 2 Write a story in which you describe your first visit to the *Globe* theatre to see a performance of one of Shakespeare's plays. (You can choose which one.) Try to capture the excitement and atmosphere of the afternoon. Maybe something unusual, amusing or frightening happened which made the outing even more memorable. As you can imagine, no-one is going to pay to stand during a long performance if they did not enjoy the theatre, so Shakespeare's plays must have been very popular.

## 9 The Tragedy of Macbeth

### *Introduction to the performance*

The main point to bear in mind when considering the plays of Shakespeare is that they were intended to be watched and not read. So here is your chance to become a Shakespearean actor.

In groups of 6–8 form yourselves into a company of actors. Your job is to present the following extract from the play *Macbeth*. You may only use the means that were available to the Elizabethan players, ie sound effects, simple props, music, costumes (you could simply make yourselves some head dresses).

You will not need scenery, but you can use signs to show where each scene takes place. If you don't have enough actors then some of you will have to have more than one part. It was not unusual for actors of the time to have six parts. The only advantage is that you will have girls in your company, but that need not stop a boy from playing a female role as they did in Elizabethan times.

*HINTS: Read the scenes through several times and use the notes to help you with the meaning. Don't worry if you cannot understand every word – most adults can't either!*

You will see from the layout of the script that Shakespeare wrote his plays as poems but to make sense of the verse do not read it just a line at a time. Use the punctuation as a guide to know when to pause and then the blank verse, as it is called, will be much clearer to you.

You will need to think carefully about the stage or space on which you intend to perform. You may want to appoint a member as a director whose job will be to make sure that each actor knows when to enter and exit. They will also decide the cues for movement during the scene. Help each other work out how a character is feeling when the lines are being spoken, whether the speech should be given in an angry or a sad tone, and so on. If you are using props, such as a chair or table, you will need to work out who will bring them on and off stage.

Finally, remember that the audience will also be reacting as Elizabethans so make sure that you make good use of rehearsal time – after all you don't want to end up being pelted with rotten fruit or being booed off stage!

The six A3 sheets fit together as shown on the left to form the completed poster. The thin regions between the dotted lines indicate areas where the printed areas of the posters overlap. Before assembly, each of the photocopied sheets should be trimmed as shown below.

Better final results may be obtained if the poster is assembled onto a card backing. The overall dimensions of the finished poster are 81.7 cm by 79 cm.

