



**GLOBE
EDUCATION**

Audiences

By 1600 London theatres, like the Globe, could take up to 3000 people for the most popular plays. With several theatres offering plays most afternoons, this meant between 10,000 and 20,000 people a week going to London theatres. That's a lot of people! So who were they?

Who came to the theatres?

The answer is 'just about everyone in London society' – generally more men than women, but all sorts of people. One visitor, in 1617, described the crowd around the stage as 'a gang of porters and carters'. Others talked of servants and apprentices spending all their spare time there. But wealthier people were in the audience too. In 1607, the Venetian ambassador bought all the most expensive seats for a performance of Shakespeare's *Pericles*. Even royalty loved watching a play. They didn't go to public theatres, but companies of actors were summoned to perform at the courts of Elizabeth I and James I.

How much did it cost?

In open air theatres the cheapest price was only 1 penny which bought you a place amongst the 'groundlings' standing in the 'yard' around the stage. (There were 240 pennies in £1.) For another penny, you could have a bench seat in the lower galleries which surrounded the yard. Or for a penny or so more, you could sit more comfortably on a cushion. The most expensive seats would have been in the 'Lord's Rooms'. Admission to the indoor theatres started at 6 pence. One penny was only the price of a loaf of bread. Compare that to today's prices. The low cost was one reason the theatre was so popular.

What did they get for their money?

The groundlings were very close to the action on stage. They could buy food and drink during the performance – pippins (apples), oranges, nuts, gingerbread and ale. But there were no toilets and the floor they stood on was probably just sand, ash or covered in nutshells. Some visitors complained that the pit smelled of garlic and beer and no good citizen would show his face there. So paying more got the wealthy a seat under cover, and perhaps a cushioned seat.



The groundlings stand in the yard very close to the stage during performances, with more expensive seating in the galleries surrounding them.

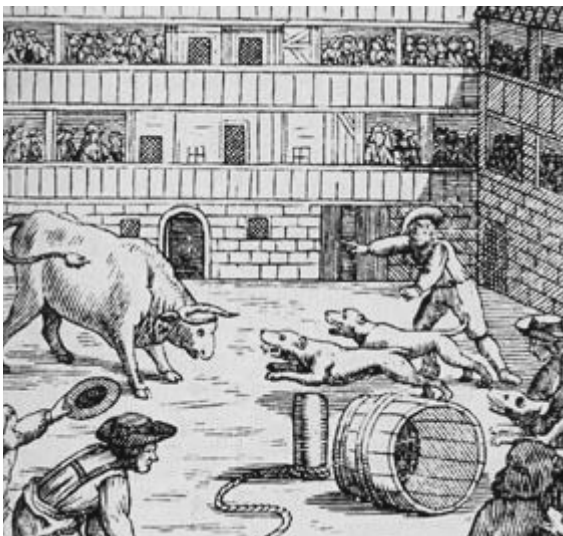
Competition for audiences

Theatres had to compete for audiences against other London entertainment. These included cock-fighting and bear-baiting which were enjoyed by both the poor and the wealthy.

In 1591, London theatres were banned from performing on Thursdays because 'the players do recite their plays to the hurt of bear-baiting, maintained for Her Majesty's pleasure'.

How did the audience behave?

Some of the audience went to the theatre to be seen and admired, dressed in their best clothes. But these people were not necessarily well behaved. Most didn't sit and watch in silence like today. They clapped the heroes and booed the villains, and cheered the special effects. Pickpockets sometimes joined the audience and in 1612, magistrates banned music at the end of plays at the Fortune, saying the crowd had caused 'tumults and outrages' with their dances. We have very few accounts of how the audience behaved, and most of them are about 'bad' behaviour. This probably tells us more about what was 'news' than how audiences behaved all the time.



A woodcut of Bearbaiting, made around 1620.

Did you know?

Today, the place where you buy your theatre tickets is called the Box Office.

In Shakespeare's day, as people came into the theatre or climbed the steps to their seats, audiences had to put their money in a box. So the place where audiences pay became known as the box office.

What effect did the audience have on the success of a play?

With such large audiences, plays only had short runs and then had to be replaced. Between 1560 and 1640 about 3,000 new plays were written. To attract the crowds, these plays often re-told famous stories from the past, and they used violence, music and humour to keep people's attention. This was vital because, if audiences didn't like a play, they made their feelings known. At the Swan in 1602, the audience damaged the chairs, stools, curtains and walls. And, in 1629, a visiting French company were hissed and 'pippin-pelted' from the stage. This was probably because the company used women actors, but could just have been because they were French. Since it was so involved in the performance of a play, the audience was vital to its success.

Further Resources

Eyewitness Account

This webpage has a first-hand account of an audience member. It quotes the diary of theatre-goer in 1599. www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/16century/topic_4/tpatter.htm

Bloodthirsty Plots

Theatre audiences seemed to love blood and gore. This webpage gives details of violent deaths in Shakespeare's plays. www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/violenceinshakespeare