The world of the theatre

1. London’s permanent theatres

The building of **permanent playhouses** in London was a break with the past.
1. London’s permanent theatres

Towards the end of the 16th century, several theatres were built:

- the **Theatre** (by James Burbage, 1576)
- the **Curtain** (by James Burbage, 1577)
- the **Rose** (by Philip Henslowe, 1587)
Towards the end of the 16th century, several theatres were built:

- the **Swan** (by Francis Langley, 1595)
- the **Curtain** (by Cuthbert Burbage, 1599)
- the **Fortune** (by Philip Henslowe, 1600)
2. The architecture of theatres

The playhouses:

- were **round** or **octagonal** in shape
- were **12 metres** high

The Globe Theatre was built in 1599 by Shakespeare’s playing company, and was destroyed by fire on 29 June 1613. A modern reconstruction of the Globe, named “Shakespeare’s Globe”, opened in 1997. It is on London South Bankside.
2. The architecture of theatres

The playhouses:

- had a diameter of **25 metres**

- had a **rectangular** stage

A reconstruction of the Globe Theatre. Folger Shakespeare Library.
3. Internal layout

The same basic structure consisted of:

- a stage partially covered by a thatched roof supported by two pillars and projected into a central area
3. Internal layout

The structure included:

- **three tiers** of galleries around the stage with the actors’ dressing room at the back.

The interior drawing of “The Swan” by Johannes de Witt, circa 1596. The Swan Theatre was built by Francis Langley about 1594, south of the Thames. The Swan was one of the largest and most distinguished of all the playhouses in London.
4. The audience

The “box-offices” offered a wide range of prices:

- a penny (=1/12 of a London worker’s weekly salary) granted entrance to the pit (standing room around the stage)

- six pence granted access to seated places in the covered galleries. Only city merchants and the nobility could afford the price
4. The audience

- The spectators **ate** and **drank** during the performance.
- They freely expressed their emotions with **laughter** or **tears**.
- They had a relish for **language** and long speeches.

Geoffrey Rush in *Shakespeare in Love* directed by John Madden, 1998

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4. The audience

- They were eager for sensation and overwhelming emotion.
- They loved metaphor and extremes.
- They enjoyed thrills and horror.
- They loved chronicles and history plays with heroic deeds (strong national feeling).
5. The actors

- Actors had to join a **company** of a prominent figure and bear his **livery and arms** (The *Chamberlain’s Men* of Elizabeth I and the *King’s Men* of James I).

- An actor’s **shareholding** depended on the sum he invested to buy **props and costumes** of which he was joint owner.
5. The actors

- They had to vary their repertoire.
- They had no more than two weeks to prepare a new play.
- They often found themselves playing several roles in the same performance.
- They should have excellent memory.
6. Female roles

- Companies included **5-6 boys** to play female roles until their voices broke.

- They learnt singing, dancing, diction and **feminine gestures and intonation** from a very young age.

- Contemporary audiences found them **very convincing**.
7. The clown and the fool

**The clown**

Rough peasant whose language counterbalanced other characters’ heroic or romantic language

**The fool**

Professional jester dressed in motley, cap and bells