

The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, Act III, by William Shakespeare
Enrichment: The Globe Theatre

The flag is flying from the top of the Globe Theatre in London, just south of the city, indicating that a play will be performed this afternoon. You hurry through the day, pay your two pennies, and crowd with as many as 3,000 others into the galleries of the Globe. You have a wooden bench seat in the second tier of the galleries and can hear the thumping of feet from the tier above you. Down below, the rectangular stage juts out into the round “yard.” At the back of the stage is a three-story façade in which there are several windows and a balcony.

Around the edge of the stage are the groundlings, the spectators who paid a penny apiece to enter the theater and stand on the ground to watch. The stage is raised to prevent eager spectators from joining onstage fights and battle scenes. You are glad to have paid for a gallery seat, for it looks as if it might rain on the open yard and the partially roofed stage.

This description captures the sights of a typical day at the Globe in the 1590s. The design of the theater was such that even the viewers in the third gallery were no more than 50 feet from the front of the stage. The round shape and tiered structure of the theater allowed for an intimacy that contributed to the success of the plays and to Elizabethan theater in general.

The Globe Theatre burned down in 1613. The acting company rebuilt it, using a tiled roof instead of the ill-fated thatched roof that had fed the fire. The Globe and all other London theaters were closed in 1642 for political reasons. The Puritans who came into power just then believed that theatergoing was frivolous and led to temptation and poor behavior, at best. The Globe was then dismantled in 1644.

That was the end of the story until 1987, when construction began on a re-creation of the Globe Theatre at the original site. An American actor named Sam Wanamaker (who died in 1993) engineered the new monument to Shakespeare. The plan of the new Globe is based on sixteenth-century drawings and on evidence drawn from archaeological excavations at the site of the original Globe. The new Globe’s first season began in June 1997. Modern-day theatergoers can once again experience a Shakespearean play in the intimate, open-air atmosphere for which it was written.

DIRECTIONS: Use the information on this page to answer the following questions.

1. What might be some consequences of attending a play in an open-air theater?

2. Describe what it would be like to be a groundling at the Globe Theatre. How might being so close to the stage action affect your experience?

3. Why is it significant that a reproduction of Shakespeare’s original theater has been built?

4. What does the new Globe indicate about people’s attitudes toward Shakespeare and his plays?
