The Elizabethan theater

The medieval drama had been an amateur endeavor presented either by the clergy or members of the various trade guilds. The performers were not professional actors, but ordinary citizens who acted only in their spare time. With the centralization of the population in the cities during the later part of the Middle Ages, the interest in secular drama began to increase.

At the end of the medieval period, when there were still some guild productions, a rivalry developed between the amateur actor and the new professional actor which stimulated interest in the art of acting. In the sixteenth century, the Elizabethan stage became almost wholly professional and public. Professional groups were formed which charged admission fees to allow audiences to witness their performances. The new theater groups devoted their entire time to the art and craft of play producing. The art of acting be-came a profession during the Elizabethan period which would furnish a good livelihood for the actor. Likewise, the production of plays at this time was a good financial venture.

Because of the Act of 1545, which classed any person not a member of a guild as a vagabond and subject to arrest, the groups of actors were exposed to a new danger since many of them were no longer members of a guild and were devoting themselves to traveling about the country and acting. In order to save themselves from being arrested, many of the actors put themselves under the patronage of an important person. Then they could be called a servant of this person and would be free of the charge of being a vagabond. Although many times the relationship between actors and patrons was only nominal, there were a few of these patrons who did give some financial assistance to the actors.

Late in the century, Queen Elizabeth gave permission for a group of actors to perform in London in spite of local rules against actors. Elizabeth stipulated that they could act in London as long as their performances met the approval of the Master of the Revels. By the end of the century, there were always a number of groups of companies playing in London and also others touring the outlying districts.

The actors, usually young males, organized themselves into companies in which each of them would own a certain number of shares. These companies were cooperative and self-governing and divided the profit from the performances. The company would either lease or build its own theater in which to perform, hire men to play the minor parts, and get young apprentice boys to play the female parts in the plays. The important members of the company usually played definite types of characters. For example, Richard Burbage would always play the leading tragic roles, whereas such actors as William Kempe and Robert Armin would play the comic roles.

Plays were often written for a particular troupe or company, and often at their direction. For example, a playwright might read the first act to the members of the company and then accept their criticism and suggestions for changes. Consequently, many plays might be considered as the combined effort of dramatists and actors.

The method of acting was peculiar to the Elizabethan period. The actors expressed themselves in a highly operatic manner with flamboyant expressions. The gestures were stylized according to certain rhetorical traditions. Rhetoric books of the time told exactly how to use one's hands to express fear or anger or other emotional states.

The Elizabethan stage was a "presentational theater" in that there was no attempt to persuade the audience that they were not in a theater and no attempt was made to create any dramatic illusions because there was very little scenery. Also, the actors could speak directly to the audience; the soliloquy, a speech spoken directly to the audience, was a typical characteristic of Elizabethan drama. Since the stage was relatively unadorned, the actors depended upon the visual color and pageantry of their elaborate costumes to give color to the play. Sometimes there was an attempt to wear historical costumes, but most often the actors wore decorative and elaborate Elizabethan dress.

The Elizabethan stage also was a repertory stage; that is, an actor would have memorized certain roles for a limited number of plays. Therefore, each company would present only a given number of plays at prescribed intervals. An incomparable record of the repertory system is Henslowe's diaries. Henslowe kept valuable records of the plays which were performed by the Admiral's company, with which he was associated from 1592 to 1597.

From Henslowe's records we have derived the following information about the repertory season. The plays were performed almost daily throughout the year except when the companies observed a Lenten suspension. Then oftentimes there was a summer break from mid-July to the beginning of October. In any two-week period, there would be eleven performances and only one would repeat a play. A play would never be presented on two consecutive days. Six out of the ten plays would be new works for that season, two would be carry-overs from the previous year, and two others would be older plays which had been revised. The alteration of plays was generally irregular. But with a new play, there seems to have been a general pattern of presentation. The play would be repeated several times after it had been first staged, then it would be acted two times a month for the first months and gradually would be repeated less frequently until in a year and a half it would generally fade from the repertory.

The Elizabethan theater building evolved from constructions that had previously been used for public entertainments — the bear-baiting ring, the innyard. The first plays were given in inns, where tables would be put together to function as a platform or stage. Then the guests would watch from the balcony of their rooms or from the innyard.

The first regular theater was constructed in 1576 by James Burbage and was called "The Theater." In the next thirty years, eight new theaters were built around London, mostly in the district of Shoreditch or Bankside. They were located in these districts because they were just outside the city limits and thus were not under the jurisdiction of the city council, which opposed the opening of theaters because of fire, sedition, and plague. The most important theaters which were built in this period were the "Curtain" in 1577, the "Rose" in 1587*,*the "Swan" in 1595*,*the "Globe" (Shakespeare's theater) in 1599, the "Fortune" in 1600, and the "Red Bull" in 1605*.*

A few records have survived showing the architecture of the Elizabethan theater. There is one drawing by DeWitt showing the construction of the "Swan" theater. From this sketch, we know that the "Swan" was a three-tiered circular building with a large protruding platform extending out into the center of the enclosure. It was an open structure so that natural light entered through the top. The spectators sat in either the gallery around the sides or down in the "pit."

Considerable information has also been preserved concerning the design of the Globe theater. The "Globe" was octagonal in shape with a platform extending to the center of the theater. The stage had an inner stage which was used for special scenes. There was also a trapdoor in the platform (and sometimes another one in the concealed stage) which was used for the sudden appearance of ghosts and specters. Most of the action of a play would take place on this platform, which contained virtually no scenery.

The Elizabethan theater was an intimate theater since the actor was seldom farther away than forty feet from the audience. This close physical proximity provided for the maximum communication. The spectators were not only sitting in front of the stage but on three sides as well.