

The History of Elizabethan Theatre

The medieval drama had been an amateur endeavor presented either by the clergy or members of the various trade unions. 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 (union) productions, a competition 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 became 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 undertaking.

Because of the Act of 1545, which classed any person not a member of a guild as a tramp 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 support 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 (tramp). 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 required that they could act in London as long as their performances met the approval of the Master of the Festivities. 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.