

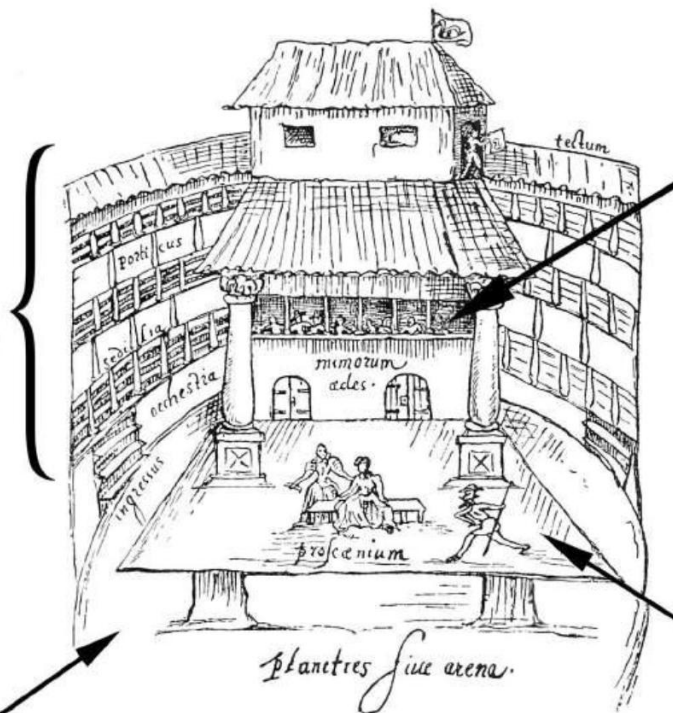
Shakespeare's Language of the Theatre

A

Shakespeare used language not only to tell the story of his plays but also to let it come alive in the special context of the theatre. Theatres at the time looked very different from theatres today: they were round buildings without a roof over the courtyard and a big part of the audience stood on three sides around the stage, which reached far into the courtyard. The drawing below gives you an idea of what the stage area looked like in Shakespeare's time.

B

galleries, where people could get a seat; more expensive than standing



E

musicians' gallery, where musicians played live music during the performance; also used by actors whenever a character was supposed to appear 'above' on stage

D

stage (also called thrust stage), reaching into the courtyard on three sides

C

courtyard (also called pit), where people used to stand and watch the play

F

In a theatre like this, you cannot use a lot of scenery to make the audience understand where the action was taking place because you would block the view of some of the people standing in the courtyard. In addition, they could not turn down the lights for scenes set at night. The only source of light was normal daylight, and performances usually started in the early afternoon. In order to make the audience understand where the play is set and at which time of the day the scene is happening, Shakespeare put a lot of information about this into the lines the characters speak.

In addition, the lines also help the actors to remember what they are actually meant to do on stage while speaking them: they mention the props the actors need and they even say what they have to do with them during the scene. For an actor who needs to keep several plays in his mind and who had very little time to learn their part off by heart and to rehearse the play, this is a great help.