

The Changing Theatre

The theatre changed significantly throughout the 100 years, from 1600 to 1700. William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* took to a very different stage than William Congreve's *The Way Of The World*. To understand the extent of the theatre's shift throughout the 17th century, it is necessary to analyze the exact timeline of events over the course of the century.

At the start of the 1600s, Queen Elizabeth I was ruling over England. The Elizabethan Era spanned from 1558-1603, and famous playwrights included William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson. The Globe Theatre was prosperous, and the amphitheater was built with a large pit in front of the stage for lower-class 'groundlings' to stand and watch. More often than not, attending the theatre was for the working class, and individuals were crammed, uncomfortably seated, or standing shoulder to shoulder. On stage, the acting job was limited to men, and the ladies' roles were performed in costume. Women were prohibited from performing in the theatre or working behind the scenes as playwrights. English plays followed the iambic pentameter rhythm. Lines were delivered in poem and verse.

Following the death of Queen Elizabeth I, King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England. This sparked the beginning of the Jacobean Era of theatre, ranging from 1603-1625. Theatre in the Jacobean rule delved into something much darker, as seen in Shakespeare's tragic tale of *Macbeth*. King James I was fascinated by the supernatural, and many productions at this time included elements of prophecy and superstition. Theatre in the Jacobean Era lacked props and set design, but more playhouses had begun to be built with roof coverings.

After the Jacobean Era, theatre was banned. The English Civil War led to the Commonwealth period in which Puritan Parliament outlawed live productions. Many actors and playwrights lost their jobs as the theatres were forced to board up their doors. Although this was

a dark moment in theatre's history, it led to an enormous theatre resurgence in the following period. In 1660, after 11 years of the Republican rule, theatre returned. Charles II came into power, the Church of England was restored, and entertainment flourished. This period became known as the Restoration Era. Many new changes happened in the theatre at this time, bringing on the most drastic shifts of the century. With the theatre reopening, women were granted a whole new set of rights. Now, women have the ability to publish their own productions and act on stage. Charles II prioritized many aspects of the theatre at this time, and attending a production became much grander. Plays moved indoors and were attended by the wealthy upper and middle class. The theatre was a space to engage socially, and behavioral etiquette became far more formal. This shift in audience led to a change in writing style. Now, plays were written in more prose and less poetry. The Comedy of Manners emerged at the tale end of the 17th century. This form of theatre was satire and made fun of a highly aristocratic society. Individuals came to the theatre to laugh at obscure stories that poked fun at the societal normalities and ambitions of the shallow attendees. The stage at this time possessed more elaborate costumes, props, and design elements. The theatre now looked much more similar to the version we see today.