

The Elizabethan Age

1. The *Elizabethan Age* is simply the Renaissance in England. It is named after Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled Great Britain for 45 years (from 1558-1603).
2. There were many theatrical developments during the Elizabethan Age. First, acting became a *profession* rather than a pastime for amateurs. This allowed playwrights to write more demanding plays. (It would be years, however, before professional actors were treated with respect.)
3. Another development: theatres became *permanent*, public *buildings* rather than temporary stages or carts in town squares or church yards. (See also Teatro Olimpico) Non-religious theatre was still considered evil, so theatres were built outside of London (across the Thames River). Theatre companies ran a flag up a pole to signal that a play was going to be presented. The most famous Elizabethan theatre was The *Globe Theatre*, where Shakespeare's plays were done.
4. The Elizabethan stage was a raised platform, with the audience surrounding the stage on three sides. This is a *thrust stage*, compared to the Italian proscenium stage. Most audience members (at least the cheap seats) stood.

5. The English did not follow the Neoclassical unities. Instead, English dramas were structured in brief scenes, back-to-back. Most plays were staged on an open, neutral stage. When one group of characters left stage and another entered, the audience understood that the location was changing. A few pieces of scenery would indicate the entire location. For example, a throne would represent an entire palace. Sometimes, a character would clue the audience by announcing or describing the location. This is called *spoken décor*.

6. **Christopher Marlowe** (1564-1593) was one of the first playwrights to use the dramatic poetry called *iambic pentameter*. This helped the dialogue to sound musical when spoken.

7. **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616) was the greatest playwright of the Elizabethan Age. Many consider him to be the greatest playwright of all time. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, married Anne Hathaway in 1582 and fathered three children. He went to London around 1587 to get his start in theatre, starting as a hireling (errand boy) for a theatre company called The Lord Chamberlain's Men, working up to actor, then shareholder and playwright. Shakespeare adapted stories from English and Roman history and Italian literature to create some of the world's most loved plays, including *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*.