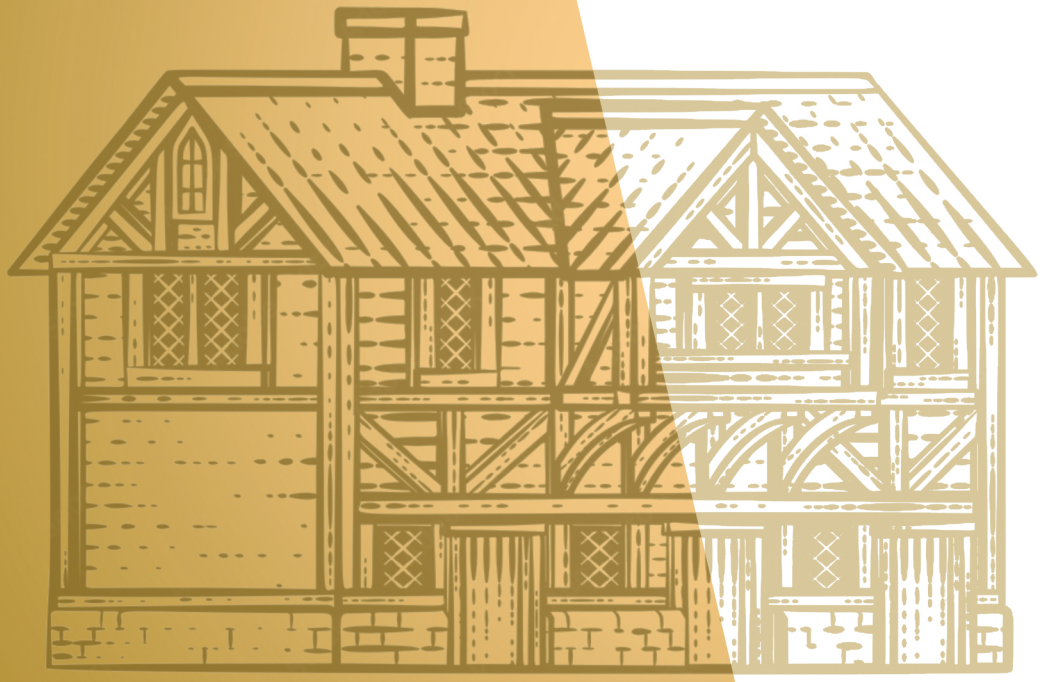
Andrew Brownfoot

Shakespeare on stage





including pop-up theatre scenes to make yourself

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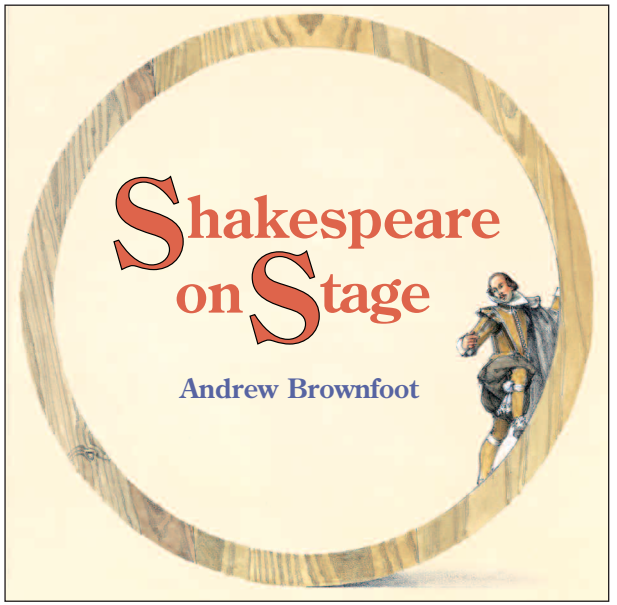
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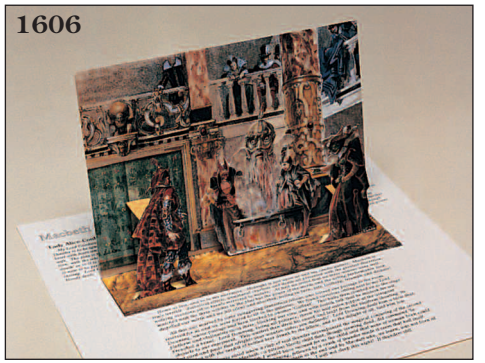


O! for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention;
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
... Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?

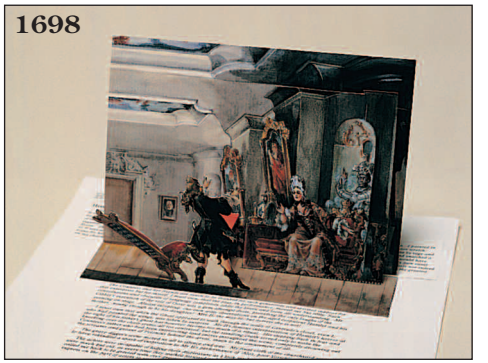
Henry V Chorus

Shakespeare is probably the most gifted playwright in any language that the world has ever known. He was born in 1564 at Stratford-upon-Avon and died in 1616, leaving behind a legacy of wonderful plays that have been performed ever since. Little is known about his life and this has given plenty of opportunity for speculation that the plays were in fact written by someone else. However it is the plays which have survived and which are the lasting memorial. This book explores how they have been treated and staged over the past four hundred years.

As part of this exploration, there are four three-dimensional pull-up theatre scenes to cut out and make. They are presented in the form of personal diaries and tell of the experiences of four theatre-goers in widely different periods of the past. They tell us how they looked forward to the performance of the chosen play and we can read their comments afterwards. Although our diarists are imaginary, they do give us an intriguing insight into what the theatre was like at those times and how Shakespeare was regarded by his audiences.



Macbeth at the Globe



Hamlet at the Countess's



Romeo and Juliet at Her Majesty's



Measure for Measure at St. Martin's

The Globe in Shakespeare's Time

The first public playhouses in London were built on the plan already used for the entertainment of 'bear baiting', a 'sport' which satisfied the blood lust of the average Elizabethan in much the same way as horror films delight many audiences today. The plan could vary in shape from rectangular to multi angled, like the Globe Theatre itself, with two or more galleries for spectators to see the show. Where the unfortunate bears had been tethered and then torn to shreds by mastiffs, a platform stage for the actors was erected. With no fearsome animals in the yard, the space which remained was used for those in the audience who were prepared to stand and thus pay less to see the play. To enter the 'Yard' cost a penny, the 'Galleries' cost two pence and the 'Lords' Rooms' at six pence were for the most extravagant, being closest to the stage and partitioned off from the Galleries.

The stage, about 1.5 metres high, could be as much as 12 metres across and extended into the middle of the Yard. At the back there were two or three entrances for the actors. At the First Gallery level on the 'Tiring Room' facade there was a balcony, sometimes used in the performance but often used for members of the audience. To protect the actors and their expensive costumes from bad weather, a canopy called 'The Heavens' extended over the stage. Actors or objects could be lowered on to the stage from one or more 'huts' on the roof. Thunder effects were also produced there by rolling a stone ball across it. The decoration of the theatre and stage was sumptuous, with carved woodwork that was gilded and painted to look like marble, in the Italian style. The Heavens were painted with sun, moon and stars and perhaps the signs of the zodiac, hangings covered part of the tiring-house facade and green rushes were strewn on the stage itself.

Like all back stage areas, the 'Tiring Room' where the actors 'attired' or dressed for the performance, was a busy crowded and unglamorous space. It smelt of sweat and make-up and, to the outsider, would appear totally chaotic; everyone rushing about and nervously adjusting their wigs, skirts or swords, grabbing a bite to eat, exercising their voices or practising moves.

