In a world without television, movies, or radio, plays were an important source of amusement. This was especially true in Shakespeare's London.

A day's entertainment often began with a favorite amusement, bear-baiting. A bear would be captured and chained to a stake inside a pit. A pack of dogs would be released, and they would attack the bear. Spectators placed bets on who would die first. Many bear pits had to keep up to 120 dogs at a time, just to ensure enough healthy dogs for the day's "sport." Some bears, such as "old Henry Hunks," became crowd favorites. In fact, bear-baiting was so popular that the loss of a bear was a real catastrophe. When one company's bear died of old age, the manager actually sold his Bible to buy a new bear. The bear pits only cost a penny, so they were very popular with working-class Londoners.

After the bear-baiting was over, another penny paid for a ticket to a play. Each theater had its own company of actors, who were often supported by a nobleman or a member of the royal family. For example, Shakespeare was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Lord Chamberlain arranged entertainment for the Queen and her court.

When Shakespeare wasn't performing for the court, his responsibilities as co-owner of the Globe Theatre kept him busy. He wrote plays, hired actors, and paid the bills. Since the Globe presented a new play every three weeks, Shakespeare and his actors had little time to rehearse or polish their productions. To complicate matters even more, most actors played more than one part in a play. One troupe used only seven members to play 18 roles.

In order to overcome these problems, actors and managers had to improvise. If one cast member was sick, another took over. It didn't matter if the character was young or old, male or female. Makeup could make anyone look old, and young boys played all the female roles. Most acting companies had three or four young boys who were practically raised in the theater. They started as early as age seven and played female roles until they began shaving. Shakespeare had a favorite boy actor who played Juliet, Cleopatra, and Lady Macbeth. Women would not become part of the English theater for another 50 years.

Most plays were performed in the afternoon. That seems strange to us, but

In many of Shakespeare's plays, several different settings or areas had to be represented at one time. The drawing above, by C. Walter Hodges, represents act 2, scene 1. During this scene, Romeo moves from the street into Juliet's orchard. Mercutio and Benvolio remain on the street. After Romeo enters the orchard, he goes to Juliet's balcony.
knaves." They were especially likely to cause trouble during the performance. If the play was boring, groundlings would throw rotten eggs or vegetables. They talked loudly to their friends, played cards, and even picked fights with each other. A bad performance could cause a riot. One theater was set on fire by audience members who didn't like the play.

The stage was open to the sky, so if it rained or snowed, the actors were miserable. The stage was rather bare, with only a few pieces of furniture. Some theaters did add a few special effects. For example, Shakespeare had trapdoors installed at the Globe Theatre. He used them when he needed a ghost to rise up on the stage. Blood was also a big attraction at most theaters. During battle and murder scenes, actors hid bags of pig's blood and guts under their stage doublets. When pierced with a sword, the bags' gory contents spilled out onto the stage.

In addition to designing sets and finding actors, managers had to deal with the unexpected. In 1575, a group of players put on a pageant for Queen Elizabeth I. Unfortunately, one of the actors had drunk too much ale. In the middle of his performance, he pulled off his mask and shouted, "No Greek God am I, your Grace! Honest Harry Goldingham, that's me!" Luckily for both her host and the actors, Queen Elizabeth thought it was a great joke.

Despite all these obstacles, plays became the most popular entertainment in London. By the time Shakespeare died in 1616, there were more than 30 theaters in and around London. Even today, English theaters are considered some of the best in the world. Shakespeare would be proud.

Elizabethan playgoers didn't have 9-to-5 jobs. One writer noted, "For whereas the afternoon being the idlest time of the day, wherein men who are their own masters (such as Gentlemen of the Court and the number of Captains and Soldiers about London) do wholly bestow themselves upon pleasure...either into gaming, following of harlots, drinking, or seeing a play, is it not better...they should betake themselves to the least [of these evils] which is plays?"

The audience crowded into the theater about 2 p.m. The cheapest seats weren't seats at all, but standing room in front of the stage. The playgoers in this area were known as "groundlings" or "penny

The three drawings above, by C. Walter Hodges, represent a possible way to stage the churchyard sequence in act 5, scene 3. First, Romeo and Paris fight. Next, Paris lies dead and Romeo goes to Juliet. Finally, Romeo and Juliet lie dead as family members and townspeople gather at the tomb. In the first four acts, the area beneath the upper stage is Juliet's bed. The same area eventually becomes her tomb.