Staging a play

PLAYS AT THE GLOBE theater were performed in the afternoons, by daylight. There was only a limited amount of scenery, but there were some wonderful special effects. Angels and gods were lowered from the “heavens,” and devils and ghosts came up through a trapdoor in the stage. Philip Henslowe, the owner of the Rose playhouse, had “a frame for the heading” for pretending to behead a man on stage. At the back of the stage, there was a curtained-off area used for displaying “discoveries” – picture-like scenes, such as characters lying dead or asleep. There was no director in charge of a production. The players knew what was expected of them, and they worked out the staging together.

PLAYING SOLDIERS
When players rushed on stage in full armor, waving swords, the audience knew that they were watching a battle. If the players carried scaling ladders, as in Henry V, the battle became a siege. In all their battle scenes, even those set in ancient Rome, the players used the latest weapons and armor.

PLAY PLOT
The “platt,” or plot, of a play was stuck on a board and hung on a peg backstage. It listed the scenes, with the exits and entrances of all the characters. During a performance, the players needed to refer to the plot because they had not read the whole play. Each player was given only his own part to learn. This is the platt for The Seven Deadly Sins, Part Two, performed at the Theatre from 1590 to 1591.

“Our statues and our images of gods...
Our giants, monsters, furies, beasts and bugbears,
Our helmets, shields, and vizors, hairs and beards,
Our pasteboard marchpanes and our wooden pies...”

RICHARD BROME
List of playhouse properties in The Antipodes

CONVINCING DISPLAY
A “beheaded man” could be shown on stage using two actors and a special table. This illusion would be set up in the “discovery space” at the back of the stage. Hidden hands would pull back the curtains, revealing to the audience what looked like the body of a man, with his head cut off and displayed at his feet.

SPIBBLED BLOOD
Pigs’ or sheep’s blood was sometimes used to add gory realism to scenes of violent death. In one play, The Rebellion of Naples, a character had a fake head cut off. The head contained a pig’s bladder, filled with blood, which gushed all over the stage.
GRAVE TROUBLE
The trapdoor in the stage allowed players to disappear and appear suddenly. The hole in the floor was also used to represent a grave. In this scene from a production of Hamlet at the modern Globe in London, it is the grave of Ophelia. Hamlet and Ophelia’s brother Laertes have jumped into the grave, both grief-stricken. They start to fight and have to be pulled apart.

Candle, often carried by a player dressed in a nightgown

USEFUL PROPS
With little scenery, props were used for visual effect, to create atmosphere, and to help set the scene. Skulls appear in several tragedies, where characters gaze at them and talk about death. A crown was an important prop in history plays, which dealt mostly with struggles for the throne. Candles carried onto the stage told the audience that it was night.

Each player put his head through a hole in the table

Ruff was placed around the player’s neck after he had put his hand through the hole in the table

The table surrounded by a curtain to hide what is underneath

The actor had to be careful not to blink or move