William Shakespeare went to London just at the time when modern theater was taking shape. In 1576, when Shakespeare was still a schoolboy, an actor named James Burbage put up a building near London designed solely for the performance of plays. It was the first such building since the days of ancient Greece and Rome. He called it the Theatre, a name now used for all playhouses.

The people of London loved to see plays, and James Burbage's Theatre was a smash success. Soon other playhouses were built, first the Curtain, then the Rose and the Swan.

These new theaters were circular wooden buildings with an open courtyard in the middle, much like the inn yards in which plays were often performed. People could stand in the courtyard for a penny. They were called groundlings, and they were known to drink too much beer and be quite noisy and rude if they didn't like the play. A wise playwright would throw in a joke every now and then to keep the groundlings happy.

Anyone willing to pay a bit more could sit in one of the three galleries, where they had a roof to protect them from the sun or a sudden shower.

Plays were only done in daylight and in nice weather, as there were no lights or heat. On the days when a play would be presented, a flag was flown from the tower of the theater, where people in the city could see it.

There was no curtain across the stage and not much scenery. A table and chairs would show that it was a banquet room; a potted bush would represent the countryside. Sometimes a sign was carried onstage telling the location, such as A WOOD NEAR ATHENS. Or an actor would walk onstage and say something such as, "Well, this is the Forest of Arden!"

The costumes were often elegant. In those days, it was customary for a gentleman to leave his clothes to his faithful servants when he died. But servants didn't wear that sort of clothing, so they sold it to the actors to wear as costumes.

The theaters also had special effects. The roof of the stage, painted with stars and called the heavens, had a trapdoor in it. If the play called for a god to descend from the sky, a throne could be lowered through the trapdoor by ropes. The sound of thunder was made by rolling a cannonball around on the floor of the hut above the stage. There was also a cannon up there that fired blanks for the battle scenes.

Just as there was a "heavens," there was also a "hell." This was the area under the stage, and it had a trapdoor, too, through which actors could appear or disappear as the play might require.

In Elizabethan plays, the death scenes were very realistic. The actor to be "stabbed" would hide a pouch of pig's blood under his shirt. This would burst when his opponent stabbed him, much to the delight of the groundlings.

It is fortunate that Queen Elizabeth and her friends at court loved plays, for there was a powerful religious group, known as the Puritans, who wanted to close the theaters. The Puritans were very strict in their morals, and they thought plays were "sinful, heathenish, lewd, and ungodly." They also believed the theater attracted unruly crowds and criminals, which, in fact, it did.

The Puritans might have put an end to this new art if the queen and her courtiers had not given the actors their protection. A nobleman would adopt a company of actors and allow them to make use of his name, such as the Admiral's Men or Lord Chamberlain's Men. At one time, even Elizabeth had her own actors, the Queen's Men. In return, the actors would give special performances for their patron, either in the great halls of their estates or at the palace. The prestige of their patron's name went with them, even when acting in one of the new theaters or touring in the countryside.

In spite of all the influential help, the Puritans still managed to drive the players outside the London city limits, where all the famous Elizabethan theaters were built.

Despite the wits, Shakespeare had gotten his start as an actor and a playwright. But soon, an outbreak of the plague hit London, and all the theaters were closed for two years. The authorities believed that large gatherings of people would spread the disease.

Shakespeare took this time to write two long poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. He dedicated them to the Earl of Southampton, who paid him handsomely for the honor. Shakespeare was very grateful to Southampton for paying him so well. From that time on, he would never be poor again. And he would remain loyal to the young earl in the difficult times ahead.

It may have been during these early years that Shakespeare wrote his series of short poems, or sonnets—though they were published much later. Some of the poems were written to a "fair youth" and others to a "dark lady." There was also a "rival poet." Historians have been trying ever since to discover who these important people in Shakespeare's life might have been.

When, in 1594, the theaters reopened, Shakespeare had written at least five plays and would write several more that year.

He invested the generous gift from the Earl of Southampton in James Burbage's acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. From then on, he was a partner and entitled to keep a percentage of the profits. His plays helped make the company popular and made Shakespeare a famous and wealthy man.

What kind of writer was Shakespeare? Most of his plots were not original. He found them in storybooks and in the pages of history. He breathed life into the main characters, added new ones, and changed the plot as his imagination prompted him. He wrote quickly—which must have helped the flow of his ideas—and he rarely revised his work. Though he sometimes made mistakes in haste, he didn't worry overly much about them. He knew his actors would make changes once they began to rehearse. He was writing for them, not for the printed page.

Shakespeare wrote three different kinds of plays: tragedies, comedies, and histories. In writing them, he followed many of the customs and fashions of the time.

The main characters in the tragedies, for example, were always doomed to death in the end. The comedies were full of mistaken identities, women disguised as men, miscarried letters, and all sorts of silly complications that were all resolved in the end, with everyone planning weddings. The histories told the stories of kings and great noblemen in exciting situations, such as war or rebellion.

Yet, while he followed all these conventions, he wove humor into his tragedies, put serious problems into his comedies, and brought the issues of the common people into his histories. His characters and the words they spoke were amazing and highly original.

Each of these wonderful plays had a central role for the company's leading man—James Burbage's son, Richard. In the early days, he played such youthful roles as Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* and Prince Hal in *Henry IV*. As he grew older, he played Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth. It is unlikely that any other actor in history has been given such a series of great parts to play!

Shakespeare's histories were very popular with the English people, partly because they were about English kings. Most historical plays at that time were about ancient civilizations, such as those of Greece or Rome. While Shakespeare wrote two such plays—*Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*—most of his histories were about the great (and not so great) kings of England as well as other heroes and villains, plots, murders, and battles out of England's history.

In doing research for *Henry IV*, he read that the king's son, Prince Hal, had been very wild in his youth. And so, with this little hint from history, Shakespeare's wonderful imagination invented Sir John Falstaff, a fat and drunken knight who leads Prince Hal astray. Though Falstaff is a shameless liar, loud, cowardly, and crude, somehow Shakespeare makes us love him. Falstaff is the butt of many jokes, but they never get him down. Even in the tense battle scenes, he is there, a ridiculous figure clanking around in enormous armor, trying to avoid danger at all cost.

The groundlings loved him, and so did everyone else. In fact, Queen Elizabeth asked Shakespeare to write another play about Falstaff, showing him in love. And so he wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in which Falstaff writes love letters to two different ladies. By chance, the ladies discover what he is up to and decide to get even. The poor fellow winds up hidden in a basket of dirty laundry, which is dumped in the Thames River.

The role of Falstaff was probably first played by Will Kempe, the popular comedian. Many of Shakespeare's plays had a "fool" role for Kempe, usually some kind of country bumpkin. Judging by the parts Shakespeare wrote for him, his acting must have been very broad, verging on slapstick.

In *Hamlet*, a group of traveling actors are cautioned to make sure their comedian does not interrupt the play by making faces or shouting silly remarks, just to get a laugh from the crowd. Some people think Shakespeare had Will Kempe in mind when he wrote those lines.

Kempe left the company after some kind of a disagreement. He then performed what today we would call a publicity stunt. He announced that he would dance all the way from London to Norwich—111 miles. When he had done it, he wrote a book about his adventure, called *Kempe's Nine Days' Wonder.*

To replace him, the company hired a new comedian named Robert Armin. He was a far more subtle actor than Will Kempe had been, and the comic parts Shakespeare wrote began to change. Now his "fools" became complex characters instead of buffoons. There was some sadness and tenderness mixed in with the comedy. For Robert Armin, Shakespeare wrote three of his greatest "fool" roles: Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Feste in *Twelfth Night*, and the Fool in *King Lear.* Though these "fools" spoke nonsense and made jokes, they also spoke great wisdom and touched our hearts.

Robert Armin must also have been musical, for Shakespeare gave him many lovely songs to sing.

The year 1599 brought a great event into Shakespeare's life—the building of the new theater that would be forever linked to his name.

The lease had run out on the land where James Burbage's Theatre stood. The building was twenty-three years old, and too small besides. When the landlord demanded more rent for his land, Richard Burbage and his brother, Cuthbert, decided to build another playhouse. They leased land across the Thames River from London, near the Rose and the Swan. Then they arranged for a carpenter named Peter Street to go into the Theatre by night and loosen the joints that held the building together.

On the night of January 20, the actors and their friends, some of them armed, "did . . . in most forcible and riotous manner take and carry away from there all the wood and timbers." That is how the landlord put it when he sued them. But the Burbages won the court case, since the landlord owned only the land, not the building.

They carried the boards across the frozen river to the new site. There they built the finest theater London had ever seen. Its sign showed a picture of Hercules holding the world on his shoulders, and it was called the Globe.

People flocked to the Globe to see Shakespeare's plays. Soon after one o'clock on fine days, London Bridge would be crowded with playgoers. Others were taxied across the river by the boatmen who were always ready and waiting at playtime.

In that first year, they did three new plays at the Globe: *As You Like It*, a comedy; *Henry V*, a history; and *Julius Caesar*, a tragedy. There were plenty of old plays to put on, too.