



British Theatre



Theatre of the United Kingdom plays an important part in British culture, and the UK has had a vibrant tradition of theatre since at least 1585.

Theatre was introduced from Europe to what is now the United Kingdom by the Romans and auditoriums were constructed across the country for this purpose. By the medieval period theatre had developed with the mummers' plays, a form of early street theatre associated with the Morris dance, concentrating on themes such as Saint George and the Dragon and Robin Hood. These were folk tales re-telling old stories, and the actors travelled from town to town performing these for their audiences in return for money and hospitality. The medieval mystery plays and morality plays, which dealt with Christian themes, were performed at religious festivals.

The New Era of the Theatre

The reign of Elizabeth I in the late 16th and early 17th century saw a flowering of the drama and all the arts. At this time appeared the man who became an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". His surviving works, including some collaborations, consist of about 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other poems. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

Yes, this man was *William Shakespeare*.
He has founded the new era of the theatre.





Shakespeare was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon. At the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway. Between 1585 and 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and part owner of a playing company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men. He appears to have retired to Stratford around 1613, where he died three years later.

Shakespeare produced most of his known work between 1589 and 1613. His early plays were mainly comedies and histories, genres he raised to the peak of sophistication and artistry by the end of the 16th century. He then wrote mainly tragedies until about 1608, including *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, considered some of the finest works in the English language. In his last phase, he wrote tragicomedies, also known as romances, and collaborated with other playwrights.

Many of his plays were published in editions of varying quality and accuracy during his lifetime. In 1623, two of his former theatrical colleagues published the *First Folio*, a collected edition of his dramatic works that included all but two of the plays now recognized as Shakespeare's.

A History of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre

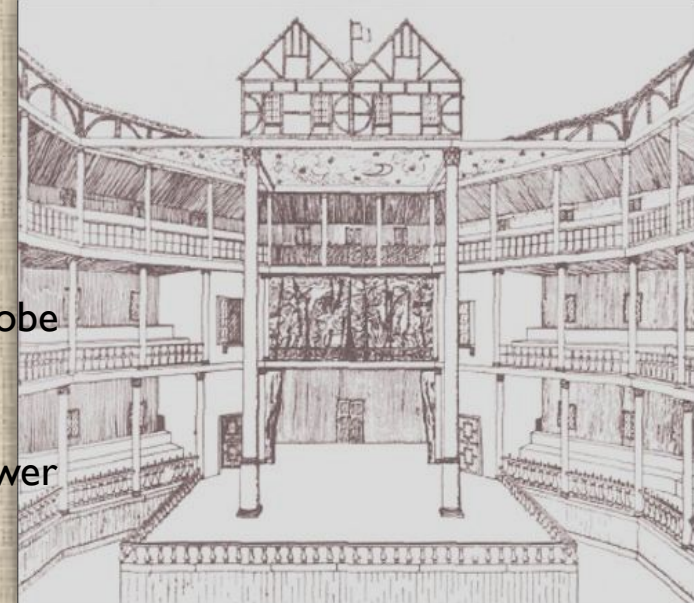
The Globe was an octagonal-shaped theatre in London with an open-air stage that could hold as many as 3000 people. The general audience were "groundlings," who sat or stood on the ground to watch, while those who could afford to sat in gallery boxes. There were specially-constructed trapdoors as well as a gallery above the stage for balcony scenes, exits and entrances.

James Burbage, owner of The Globe Theatre, moved the theatre to avoid paying higher rent. The Globe was too small to fit the scores of «theatregoers» who came to see the plays of the up-and-coming William Shakespeare. James found a new site across the Thames River, near two other famous London theatres, the Rose and the Swan. Quietly, Burbage arranged for a local carpenter, Peter Street, to go into the darkened theatre at night and loosen the building joints.

On the night of January 20, 1599, actors and friends of Burbage gathered outside the theatre. Then in a "most forcible and riotous manner," they took and carried away all the wood and timbers.

Crossing the frozen Thames, the group carried the pieces of the dismantled theatre to its new home, where it would be rebuilt. In 1613, during the premiere of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, a cannon fired during a scene and set fire to the roof. Within an hour, the Globe had burned to the ground. Most of the costumes, props, and Shakespeare's plays were rescued from the flames.

The theatre was soon rebuilt, but in 1642 the Puritans came to power and, frowning on entertainment of any kind, the new government ordered all the theatres closed. The Globe was torn down in 1644.





Richard Burbage (6 January 1568 - 13 March 1619) was an English actor and theatre owner. He was the younger brother of Cuthbert Burbage. They were both actors in drama. The son of James Burbage, a joiner who became a theatrical impresario, Burbage was a popular actor by his early 20s. His early acting career is poorly documented. It has been suggested that it included a stint in the Earl of Leicester's company, but there is no good evidence for this. He probably was acting with the Admiral's Men in 1590, with Lord Strange's Men in 1592, and with the Earl of Pembroke's Men in 1593; but most famously he was the star of William Shakespeare's theatre company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men which mutated into the King's Men on the ascension of James I in 1603. He played the title role in the first performances of many of Shakespeare's plays, including *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, and *King Lear*. But he was in great demand and also appeared in the plays of many of the great contemporary writers, such as Ben Jonson (the title role in *Volpone*, and Subtle in *The Alchemist*), John Marston (*The Malcontent*), John Webster (*The Duchess of Malfi*) and Beaumont & Fletcher (*The Maid's Tragedy*). Burbage's power and scope as an actor is revealed in the sheer size of the roles he played.

Restoration

*During the Interregnum 1642—1660, English theatres were kept closed by the Puritans for religious and ideological reasons. When the London theatres opened again with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, they flourished under the personal interest and support of Charles II. Wide and socially mixed audiences were attracted by topical writing and by the introduction of the first professional actresses (in Shakespeare's time, all female roles had been played by males). New genres of the Restoration were heroic drama, pathetic drama, and Restoration comedy. The Restoration plays that have best retained the interest of producers and audiences today are the comedies, such as William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1676), *The Rover* (1677) by the first professional woman playwright, Aphra Behn, John Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696), and William Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700). Restoration comedy is famous or notorious for its sexual explicitness, a quality encouraged by Charles II (1660–1685) personally and by the rakish aristocratic ethos of his court.*



Sarah Siddons (5 July 1755 – 8 June 1831) was a British actress, the best-known tragedienne of the 18th century. She was most famous for her portrayal of the Shakespearean character, *Lady Macbeth*, a character she made her own. After *Lady Macbeth* she played *Desdemona*, *Rosalind*, *Ophelia* and *Volumnia*, all with great success; but it was as *Queen Catherine* in *Henry VIII* that she discovered a part almost as well adapted to her acting powers as that of *Lady Macbeth*. She once told Samuel Johnson that *Catherine* was her favorite role, as it was the most natural.

The Sarah Siddons Society continues to present the Sarah Siddons Award in Chicago every year to a prominent actress.



David Garrick (19 February 1717 - 20 January 1779) was an English actor, playwright, theatre manager and producer who influenced nearly all aspects of theatrical practice throughout the 18th century and was a pupil and friend of Dr Samuel Johnson. He appeared in a number of amateur theatricals, and with his appearance in the title role of Shakespeare's *Richard III* audiences and managers began to take notice. Impressed by his portrayals of Richard III and a number of other roles, Charles Fleetwood engaged Garrick for a season at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. As an actor, Garrick promoted realistic acting that departed from the bombastic style that was entrenched when Garrick first came to prominence. His acting delighted many audiences and his direction of many of the top actors of the English stage influenced their styles as well. Furthermore, during his tenure as manager of Drury Lane, Garrick sought to reform audience behavior. While this led to some discontent among the theatre-going public, many of his reforms eventually did take hold. In addition to audiences, Garrick sought reform in production matters, bringing an over-arching consistency to productions that included scenery, costumes and even special effects.



Nathaniel Lee (1653 – 6 May 1692) was an English dramatist.

Lee's reputation was made in 1677 with a blank verse tragedy, *The Rival Queens, or the Death of Alexander the Great*. The play, which deals with the jealousy of Alexander's first wife, Roxana, for his second wife, Statira, was a favorite on the English stage right up to the days of Edmund Kean. *Mithridates, King of Pontus* (acted 1678), *Theodosius, or the Force of Love* (acted 1680), *Caesar Borgia* (acted 1680), an imitation of the worst blood and thunder Elizabethan tragedies: *Lucius Junius Brutus, Father of His Country* (acted 1681), and *Constantine the Great* (acted 1684) followed.

The Princess of Cleve (1681) is a gross adaptation of Madame de La Fayette's exquisite novel of that name. *The Massacre of Paris* (published 1690) was written about this time. Lee had given offence at court by his *Brutus*, which had been suppressed after its third representation for some lines on Tarquin's character that were taken to be a reflection on King Charles II. He therefore joined Dryden, who had already admitted him as a collaborator in an adaptation of *Oedipus*, in *The Duke of Guise* (1683), a play which directly advocated the Tory point of view. In it part of the Massacre of Paris was incorporated.

Lee's *Dramatic Works* were published in 1784. In spite of their extravagance, they contain many passages of great



Theatre in the United Kingdom In the 18th century, the highbrow and provocative Restoration comedy lost favour, to be replaced by sentimental comedy, domestic tragedy such as George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731), and by an overwhelming interest in Italian opera. Popular entertainment became more important in this period than ever before, with fair-booth burlesque and mixed forms that are the ancestors of the English music hall. These forms flourished at the expense of legitimate English drama, which went into a long period of decline. By the early 19th century it was no longer represented by stage plays at all, but by the closet drama, plays written to be privately read in a "closet" (a small domestic room).

In 1847, a critic using the pseudonym *Dramaticus* published a pamphlet describing the parlous state of British theatre. Production of serious plays was restricted to the patent theatres, and new plays were subjected to censorship by the Lord Chamberlain's Office. At the same time, there was a burgeoning theatre sector featuring a diet of low melodrama and musical burlesque; but critics described British theatre as driven by commercialism and a 'star' system.

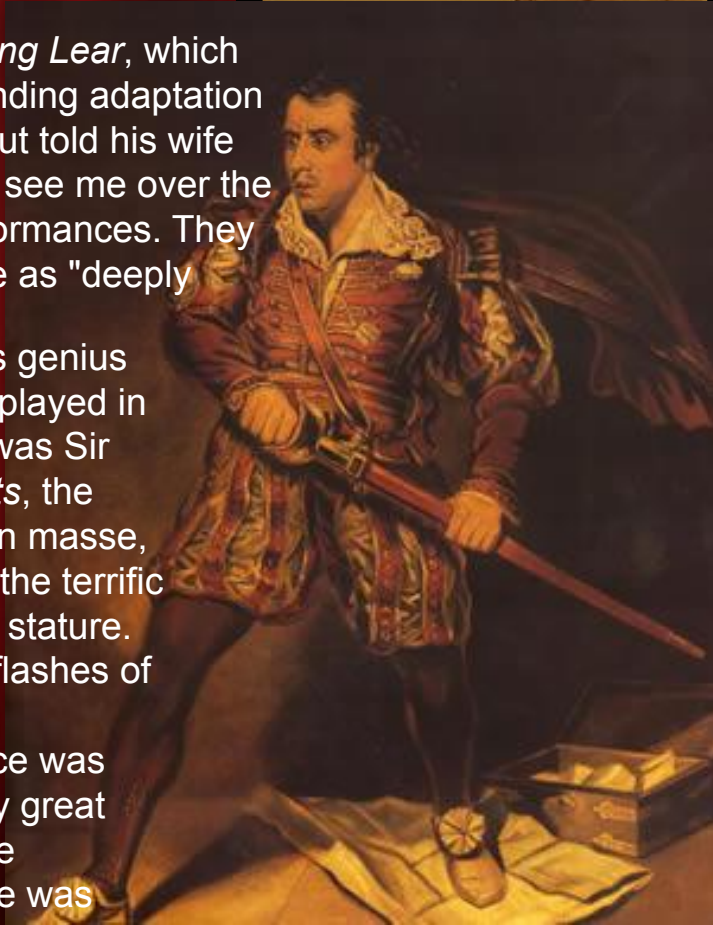
Edmund Kean (17 March 1789 – 15 May 1833) was an English actor, regarded in his time as the greatest ever.

His opening at Drury Lane on 26 January 1814 as Shylock roused the audience to almost uncontrollable enthusiasm. Successive appearances in *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* demonstrated his mastery of the range of tragic emotion. His triumph was so great that he himself said on one occasion, "I could not feel the stage under me." On 29 November 1820 Kean appeared for the first time in New York as Richard III. The success of his visit to America was unequivocal, although he fell into a vexatious dispute with the press. On 4 June 1821 he returned to England.

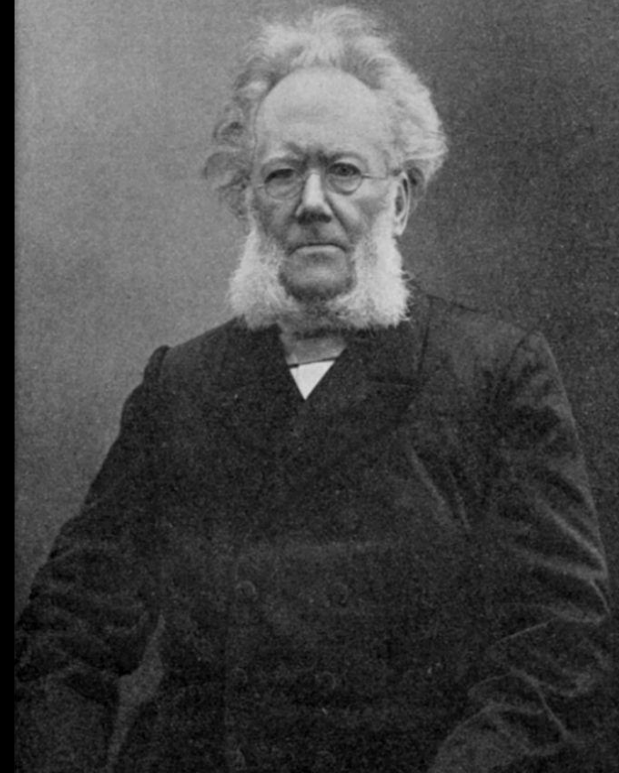
Kean was the first to restore the tragic ending to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which had been replaced on stage since 1681 by Nahum Tate's happy ending adaptation *The History of King Lear*. Kean had previously acted Tate's *Lear*, but told his wife that the London audience "have no notion of what I can do till they see me over the dead body of Cordelia." Kean played the tragic *Lear* for a few performances. They were not well received, though one critic described his dying scene as "deeply affecting", and with regret, he reverted to Tate.

It was in the impersonation of the great creations of Shakespeare's genius that the varied beauty and grandeur of the acting of Kean were displayed in their highest form, although probably his most powerful character was Sir Giles Overreach in Philip Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, the effect of his first performance of which was such that the pit rose en masse, and even the actors and actresses themselves were overcome by the terrific dramatic illusion. His main disadvantage as an actor was his small stature. Coleridge said, "Seeing him act was like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning."

If the range of character in which Kean attained supreme excellence was narrow, no one except David Garrick was so successful in so many great roles. Unlike Garrick, Kean had no true talent for comedy, but in the expression of biting and saturnine wit, of grim and ghostly gaiety he was



A change came in the late 19th century with the plays on the London stage by the Irishmen George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde and the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen, all of whom influenced domestic English drama and vitalized it again. The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre was opened in Shakespeare's birthplace Stratford upon Avon in 1879; and Herbert Beerbohm Tree founded an Academy of Dramatic Art at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1904. Producer Richard D'Oyly Carte brought together librettist W. S. Gilbert and composer Arthur Sullivan, and nurtured their collaboration. Among Gilbert and Sullivan's best known comic operas are H.M.S. Pinafore, The Pirates of Penzance and The Mikado. Carte built the Savoy Theatre in 1881 to present their joint works, and through the inventor of electric light Sir Joseph Swan, the Savoy was the first theatre, and the first public building in the world, to be lit entirely by electricity.

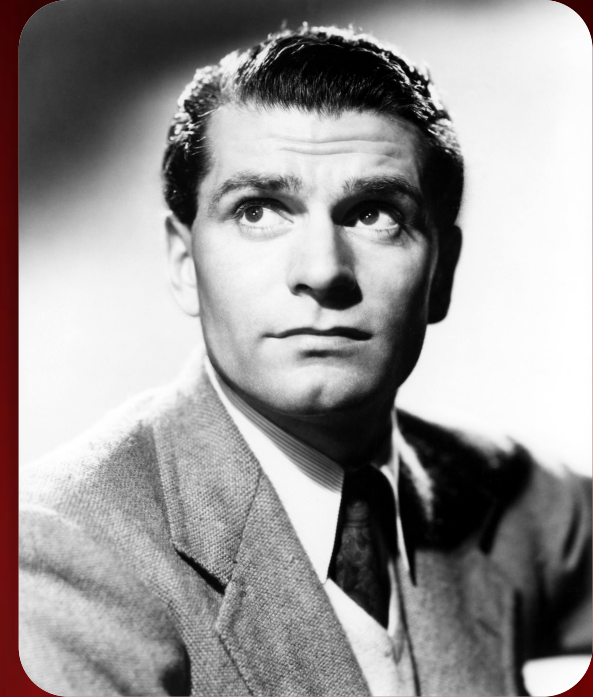


Laurence Kerr Olivier (Baron Olivier)

(22 May 1907 – 11 July 1989) was an English actor, director, and producer. He was one of the most famous and revered actors of the 20th century.

Olivier played a wide variety of roles on stage and screen from Greek tragedy, Shakespeare and Restoration comedy to modern American and British drama. He was the first artistic director of the National Theatre of Great Britain and its main stage is named in his honour.

Olivier played more than 120 stage roles: *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *Archie Rice* in *The Entertainer*. He appeared in nearly sixty films, including William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*, Otto Preminger's *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, Richard Attenborough's *Oh! What a Lovely War*, and *A Bridge Too Far*, Desmond Davis' *Clash of the Titans*, and his own *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, and *Richard III*.



He is regarded by some to be the greatest actor of the 20th century, in the same category as David Garrick, Richard Burbage, Edmund Kean and Henry Irving in their own centuries. Olivier's AMPAS acknowledgments are considerable—fourteen Oscar nominations, with two wins (for Best Actor and Best Picture for the 1948 film *Hamlet*). He was also awarded five Emmy awards from the nine nominations he received. Additionally, he was a three-time Golden Globe and BAFTA winner.

A High church clergyman's son who found fame on the West End stage, Olivier became determined early on to master Shakespeare, and eventually came to be regarded as one of the foremost Shakespeare interpreters of the 20th century. He continued to act until the year before his death in 1989. In 1999, the American Film Institute named Olivier among the Greatest Male Stars of All Time, at number 14 on the list.

Vivien Leigh, Lady Olivier (5 November 1913 – 7 July 1967) was an English actress.

She won two Best Actress Academy Awards for playing "southern belles": Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), a role she also played on stage in London's West End.



She was a prolific stage performer, frequently in collaboration with her then-husband, Laurence Olivier, who directed her in several of her roles. During her 30-year stage career, she played roles ranging from the heroines of Noël Coward and George Bernard Shaw comedies to classic Shakespearean characters such as Ophelia, Cleopatra, Juliet and Lady Macbeth.

Lauded for her beauty, Leigh felt that it sometimes prevented her from being taken seriously as an actress. However, ill health proved to be her greatest obstacle. For much of her adult life Leigh had what is now known as bipolar disorder. She earned a reputation for being difficult to work with, and her career suffered periods of inactivity. She also suffered recurrent bouts of

Sir Michael Scudamore Redgrave

(20 March 1908 - 21 March 1985) was an English stage and film actor, director, manager and author.

Like many of his peers, Redgrave was most at home on the stage and viewed work in films as a necessary but less pleasant part of being an actor. Even in films, he preferred taking on roles derived from plays, such as King Lear, Hamlet and characters created by Anton Chekhov and Eugene O'Neill. In 1948 he made his first Broadway appearance, playing Macbeth.

Beginning with the role of Young Marlow in Hunt's 1949 production of *She Stoops to Conquer*, Redgrave went on to perform the lead role in *Hamlet* the following year. His position on the London stage assured, he continued to appear in acclaimed National Theatre productions and was highly praised for his interpretation of leading figures in Shakespearean tragedies - including Prospero, Richard II, King Lear, Shylock and Antony - and for his performances in leading roles in Chekov's *Uncle Vanya* and Heinrich Ibsen's *The Master Builder*.



One of his finest hours on stage came in 1962, in a production of *Uncle Vanya*; his performance in the lead was so impressive that his friend Olivier insisted on immediately directing Redgrave in a film version of the play. The following year Redgrave appeared as Claudius in the National Theatre's first production of *Hamlet*, performing alongside his 20-year-old daughter, Lynn, in her role as a lady in waiting.

Although he was known to the general public predominately as an actor, Redgrave also produced and directed numerous plays. During World War II he staged six plays in London's popular West End and continued to direct sporadically during the next few decades. In 1951 he brought to the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon a production of *Henry IV, Part II*. Later in his career Redgrave also produced and directed operas, music being one of his many interests. He even wrote and published several plays of his own, including 1936's *The Seventh Man* and 1959's *The Aspern Papers*, the latter an adaptation of a story by Henry James that Redgrave produced and starred in on the London stage.



*Famous British
theatres*



The Old

Vic



The **Old Vic** is a theatre located just south-east of Waterloo Station in London on the corner of The Cut and Waterloo Road. Established in 1818 as the *Royal Coburg Theatre*, it was taken over by Emma Cons (British social reformer, educationalist and theatre manager) in 1880 when it was known formally as the *Royal Victoria Hall*. In 1898, a niece of Cons, Lilian Baylis (English theatrical producer and manager) assumed management and began a series of Shakespeare productions in 1914. The building was damaged in 1940 during air raids and it became a Grade II listed building in 1951 after it reopened.

It was also the name of a repertory company that was based at the theatre. The company formed the core of the National Theatre of Great Britain on its formation in 1963, under Laurence Olivier. The National Theatre remained at the Old Vic until new premises were constructed on the South Bank, opening in 1976. It underwent complete refurbishment in 1985 and in 2003, American actor Kevin Spacey was appointed as new artistic director of the *Old Vic*



The Royal National Theatre

The **Royal National Theatre** (generally known as the **National Theatre** and commonly as **The National**) in London is one of the United Kingdom's two most prominent publicly funded theatre companies, alongside the Royal Shakespeare Company. Internationally, it is styled the *National Theatre of Great Britain*. From its foundation in 1963 until 1976, the company was based at the Old Vic theatre in Waterloo. The current building was designed by architects Sir Denys Lasdun and Peter Soffley and contains three stages, which opened individually between 1976 and 1977. It is located next to the Thames in the South Bank area of central London.



Since 1988, the theatre has been permitted to call itself the **Royal National Theatre**, but the full title is rarely used. The theatre presents a varied program, including Shakespeare and other international classic drama; and new plays by contemporary playwrights. Each auditorium in the theatre can run up to three shows in repertoire, thus further widening the number of plays which can be put on during any one season.

The Royal Shakespeare Theatre

The Royal Shakespeare Theatre (RST) is a large theatre owned by the Royal Shakespeare Company dedicated to the British playwright and poet William Shakespeare. It is located in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon - Shakespeare's birthplace - in the English Midlands, beside the River Avon. The theatre re-opened in 2010 after undergoing major structural changes.

The present theatre opened on 23 April 1932 on the site of the original Shakespeare Memorial Theatre (opened 19 April 1879), which had been destroyed by fire on 6 March 1926. The architect was Elisabeth Scott, so the theatre became the first important work erected in this country from the designs of a woman architect. It is now managed by the Royal Shakespeare Company and was renamed Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 1961.



The Modern Day Globe Theatre

In 1970, interest in the Globe returned with the help of Sam Wanamaker and the Shakespeare Globe Playhouse Trust. Studies were done to establish the approximate site of the theatre and construction on a new Globe Theatre began in 1989. While digging for the new building, workers uncovered the original foundations of the Globe. As it turned out, the new theatre was located roughly 100 yards from the site of the old Globe.

In 1999, the Globe reopened with a performance of *Henry V*, one of the first plays performed in the original Globe. Today people can once more see plays in the theatre as they were performed during Shakespeare's time.





Theatreland

West End theatre is a popular term for mainstream professional theatre staged in the large theatres of London's 'Theatreland', London's main theatre district, which contains approximately forty venues, is located in the heart of the West End of central London, and is traditionally defined by The Strand to the south, Oxford Street to the north, Regent Street to the west, and Kingsway to the east. Along with New York's Broadway theatre, West End theatre is usually considered to represent the highest level of commercial theatre in the English speaking world. Seeing a West End show is a common tourist activity in London. Since the late 1990s there has been an increase in the number of famous screen actors on the London stage.

Prominent theatre streets include Drury Lane, Shaftesbury Avenue, and The Strand. The works staged are predominantly musicals, classic or middle-brow plays, and comedy performances.

Beyond the West End are the Royal National Theatre and Old Vic, in Southwark; and the Barbican Theatre, in the City of London. London also has many smaller theatres, both around the West End and its periphery.

Many theatres in the West End are of late Victorian or Edwardian construction and are privately owned. The majority of them have great character, and the largest and best maintained feature grand neo-classical, Romanesque, or Victorian façades and luxurious, detailed interior design and decoration.

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