Sometimes playwrights influence the shape and form of a theater, but more often existing theaters seem to influence the shape and form of plays. It is important that we understand Shakespeare's theater because it influenced how he wrote his plays. Shakespeare took the theater of his time, and he used it brilliantly.

The "Wooden O"

In 1576, outside the city walls of London, an actor-manager named James Burbage built the first permanent theater in England. He called it the Theatre. Up to that time, touring acting companies had played wherever they could rent space. Usually this would be in the courtyards of inns. There the actors would erect a temporary platform stage at one end of the yard and play to an audience that stood around the stage or sat in the tiers of balconies that surrounded the courtyard. It was natural, then, that the first theater built by Burbage should derive its shape and form from the inns. In 1599, Burbage's theater was torn down and its timbers were used by Shakespeare and his company to build the Globe Theatre.

In his play Henry V, Shakespeare called his theater a "wooden O." It was a large, round (or polygonal) building, three stories high, with a large platform stage that projected from one end into a yard open to the sky. In the back wall of this stage was a curtained-off inner stage. Flanking the inner stage were two doors for entrances and exits. Above this inner stage was a small balcony or upper stage, which could be used to suggest Juliet's balcony or the high walls of a castle or the bridge of a ship. Trapdoors were placed in the floor of the main stage for the entrances and exits of ghosts and for descents into hell.

The plays were performed in the afternoon. Since the stage was open to the sky, there was no need for stage lighting. There were very few sets (scenery, furniture, and so on). The stage was "set" by the language. A whole forest scene was created in one play when a character announced, "Well, this is the Forest of Arden." But costumes were often elaborate, and the stage might have been hung with colorful banners and trappings. (The groundlings, those eight hundred or more people who stood shoulder to shoulder around the stage for the price of a penny, loved a good show. Most people still do.)

We can see that this stage, with its few sets and many acting areas—forestage, inner stage, and upper stage—made for a theater of great fluidity. That is, scene could follow scene with almost cinematic ease.

In one interesting aspect the theater in Shakespeare's day was very different from the theater we know today. Plays were originally performed by the all-male medieval trade guilds, so all women's parts were played by boys. It would be many years before women appeared onstage in the professional English theater. In Shakespeare's day, Juliet would have been played by a trained boy actor.

The Modern Stage: Back to Shakespeare's Theater

It has been said that all you need for a theater is "two planks and a passion." Since Shakespeare's time "the planks" (the stage) have undergone various changes. First, the part of the stage that projected into the yard grew narrower, and the small curtained inner stage grew larger, until there developed what is
called the **proscenium stage**. Here there is no outer stage; there is only the inner stage, and a large curtain that separates it from the audience. The effect is like looking inside a window or inside a picture frame. This is the stage most of us know today. It has been standard for well over a hundred years.

But recently we have seen a reversal of this design. Now more and more theaters (especially university and regional theaters) are building "thrust" stages, or arena stages. The audience once again sits on three or even four sides of the stage.

**The Movies and the Theater: Words Versus Action**

Theater and movies are different media. People who go to plays often prefer to spend a long time watching the subtle development of conflicts among a small group of people, all in one setting. For example, all of the action in Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* takes place inside one small apartment on Chicago's South Side.

Movies are basically a *visual* medium that can whisk us from place to place. Movies must chiefly engage and delight the eye rather than the ear. (One movie director once referred to a dialogue in a movie as "foreground noise"!) The theater is much more a medium of *words*. When we go to see a play, it is the movement of the words rather than the movement of the scenery that delights us.