

# Types of Theatre and Theatre Spaces

## Proscenium arch

Most theatres built in the 17th - 20th centuries were proscenium theatres. The proscenium is the 'picture-frame' inside which the play takes place. The stage is mostly, if not all, behind the proscenium arch and there is usually a curtain to separate the stage from the audience.

The area nearest the audience on the stage is called downstage; further back is upstage. Stage left and stage right are from the audience's point of view. The wings are on both sides, out of sight of the audience. Scenery can be let down from above, from the fly loft, and a trapdoor gives access to the area under the stage. Sometimes there is a pit for an orchestra between the stage and the auditorium. Cinemas developed from theatres of this kind.



Proscenium arch theatre

## Courtyard theatre

The type of theatre Shakespeare worked in, like the Globe, disappeared soon after his death, but the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London, which proved to be an effective theatre space, has revived interest in this type of theatre. A courtyard theatre has a thrust stage with a space in front for spectators (groundlings) to stand and galleries round the edge in a horse-shoe form.



## Thrust stage theatre

The director Tyrone Guthrie (1900-1971) wanted to reduce the distance between the actors and the audience. He conceived a thrust stage, which extends from a small conventional stage into the centre of the auditorium, so that the stage is surrounded by the audience on three sides. The seating for the audience, often rising vertically in galleries, resembles the Elizabethan courtyard theatre, but there are seats nearest the stage, not standing places.

**Arena theatre (Theatre in the round)**

In an arena theatre the audience is on all four sides of the stage. Actors make their entrances and exits through the audience.

**Flexible theatre**

Often used for experimental work, this is just a large room, and the seating and acting areas can be varied according to the performance.

**Found spaces**

Any area, inside or outside buildings, can be used for theatre. Performances put on there will be site-specific. There may be multiple performing areas, and the audience may move around between different viewing points.



Arena theatre: the auditorium of the Cockpit Theatre, Marylebone (photo: Onthemat)

All these different types of spaces have different solutions for the technical demands of putting on plays. They usually include lighting, video and sound technology. Lighting involves numbers of floodlights (wash lights) and spotlights controlled by dimmers with computers. There are also laser and fog machines. Music can be recorded or live. There are dressing-rooms for the actors, a green room (where the actors can relax while waiting to go on), a stage door (actors' entrance) and a box office (where tickets are sold). There must also be plenty of space to store scenery, props and costumes, as well as rehearsal spaces. These may be in different buildings. A concourse, or foyer, with bars, cafeterias and shops is often provided for the interval.

*[Michael Mitchell]*