Interesting Facts about Shakespeare’s Globe Theater

- According to discoveries made at the Globe excavation site, the playhouse may have had as many as twenty sides, giving it a circular appearance. It was an open-air theater that held about three thousand spectators.
- Performances were given every day but Sunday, and plays ran from two to five in the afternoon, so that sunlight wouldn’t bother the audience and the players.
- As two o’clock neared, a raised flag and a trumpet fanfare proclaimed that the performance was about to begin. The flag indicated the day’s feature: black signified tragedy; white, comedy; and red, history.
- Patrons were transported across the River Thames to Southward by “wherry boats.” At one time over two thousand wherries made their way to and from the theater district.
- As people entered the theater they would drop their admission into a box (hence “box” office originated).
- Vendors offered ale, water, oranges, nuts, gingerbread, and apples, all of which were occasionally thrown at the actors.
- There was not one rest room for all three thousand spectators. Nor were there any intermissions. The playhouse thus smelled of urine, garlic, ale, tobacco, and sweat (keep in mind Elizabethans didn’t bathe)!
- There was no producer or director; the actors were in complete control of the production.
- Scenery and props were minimal. Lighting was the natural light that filtered in through the open roof. Actors described the setting through dialogue called ‘scene painting.’” (Horatio in Hamlet says, “But look, the morn in russet mantle clad....” Letting us know that it is dawn.)
Costumes were often the castoffs of aristocratic patrons and could be velvet, silk, gold, and lace. Actors also wore makeup, an abomination to the Puritans who tried to close the theaters. (After 70 years of trying, the Puritans at last triumphed. In August 1642, Parliament passed an ordinance that shut down all theaters.)

Since women were forbidden to act on the public stage, female roles were played by young boys.

Like all other playhouses, the Globe had its own acting company, which was under implement an ancient statute prohibiting “masterless men,” which stated that every man without a master was regarded as unemployed and a threat to law and order. Thus each company had a noble “master.” Shakespeare’s company was initially The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, but with the accession of James I in 1603, they became the prestigious King’s Men, the premier company in London.

Plays belonged to the acting company and not to the playwright. Shakespeare didn’t own or have any right to publish his own plays.

After 1608, the King’s Men began to use the old Blackfriars monastery as their winter playhouse. An enclosed private theater with a capacity of seven hundred, the Blackfriars catered to a select audience who could afford its higher admission price. Illuminated by candlelight, the indoor playhouse was ideal for such claustrophobic interior drams as Macbeth. Although Shakespeare’s later plays were also performed at the Globe, they were more refined than those written for the boisterous audience at the public playhouse.

The Globe burned down in 1613, when a prop cannon exploded during the first performance of Shakespeare’s Henry VIII.
In 1996, an almost exact replica of the original Globe, on almost the exact same spot the original stood, opened for business. Its mission is to produce Elizabethan plays in their entirety as they were done 400 years ago.