HISTORY & LITERATURE

where was romeo and juliet performed

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Executive Summary: Key Performance Highlights

- Original Venue: Most scholars agree the play premiered at The Curtain Theatre in Shoreditch around 1597, not the Globe.
- The Lord Chamberlain"s Men: Shakespeare’s company performed the play across multiple venues, including The Theatre and later The Globe.
- Private Stages: It was also staged at the Inns of Court and in royal palaces for Queen Elizabeth I.
- Evolution: The staging transitioned from open-air amphitheatres to indoor candlelit houses like Blackfriars.

1. Foundational Concepts: The Elizabethan Theatrical Landscape

To understand where *Romeo and Juliet*was performed, one must first understand the landscape of 16th-century London. During the mid-1590s, when William Shakespeare penned his most famous tragedy, the concept of a dedicated theatre building was still relatively new. Before the construction of permanent structures, plays were often performed in the courtyards of inns, such as the Cross Keys Inn on Gracechurch Street.

The first purpose-built playhouses were located outside the city walls of London to escape the jurisdiction of the City"s authorities, who often viewed theatre as a breeding ground for plague and immorality. These venues, known as public amphitheatres, provided the initial canvas for the star-crossed lovers. The architectural constraints and opportunities of these venues directly influenced Shakespeare"s writing, from the use of the "discovery space" to the legendary balcony scene.

2. The True Original Venue: The Curtain Theatre

While many tourists and casual readers associate Shakespeare exclusively with the Globe, historical evidence points to **The Curtain Theatre** as the likely home for the earliest performances of *Romeo and Juliet*. Built in 1577 in Shoreditch, The Curtain was used by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men between 1597 and 1599.

Archeological Evidence and Recent Discoveries

Recent excavations by the Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA) have revealed that The Curtain was not a circular building as previously thought, but rather an oblong structure. This rectangular shape would have impacted the acoustics and sightlines for *Romeo and Juliet*. The proximity of the audience to the stage at The Curtain created an intimate atmosphere essential for the play"s many soliloquies and private moments between the leads.

Why Not The Theatre?

James Burbage’s "The Theatre" was the company’s primary home before the dispute over the lease. While some early drafts of the play might have been rehearsed there, the timing of the play’s publication (the First Quarto of 1597) aligns more closely with the company’s move to The Curtain. It was here that the play likely gained its massive initial popularity, solidified by the legendary performances of Richard Burbage as Romeo.

3. The Iconic Home: The Globe Theatre (1599 and Beyond)

In 1599, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men dismantled "The Theatre" and moved its timbers across the Thames to

Bankside to build **The Globe**. While *Romeo and Juliet*was already a hit by the time the Globe opened, it remained a staple of the repertoire. The "Wooden O" provided a more sophisticated stage for revivals of the play.

The Mechanics of the Globe Stage

The Globe featured several levels that were pivotal for *Romeo and Juliet*:

- The Platform Stage: A large rectangular stage where the street brawls and the Capulet ball took place.
- The Heavens: A canopy painted with stars and celestial bodies, ironically hanging over the tragic fate of the lovers.
- The Frons Scenae: The decorated wall at the back of the stage with doors for entrances and exits.
- The Gallery (The Balcony): Often cited as the "upper station," this was used for the famous balcony scene (Act 2, Scene 2).

Note on the Balcony: Interestingly, the word "balcony" does not appear in the original stage directions. Instead, the text refers to "Juliet appearing at a window." The concept of a physical balcony became a theatrical tradition later in the 17th and 18th centuries.

4. Private Performances and the Blackfriars Theatre

As Shakespeare"s fame grew, his plays moved from the dusty, loud public pits to the more refined indoor spaces. *Romeo and Juliet* was performed at the **Blackfriars Theatre**, an indoor venue that catered to a wealthier audience. This transition changed the aesthetics of the play.

Candlelight and Atmosphere

Unlike the open-air Globe, Blackfriars used artificial lighting. This allowed for a more atmospheric rendering of the play’s night scenes—the tomb scene, the moonlit balcony, and the early morning farewell. The use of candles required "intervals" to trim the wicks, which helped evolve the play"s structure into the five-act format we recognize today.

Royal Command Performances

The Lord Chamberlain’s Men (later the King’s Men under James I) were frequently summoned to perform at court. Records indicate that Shakespeare"s works were performed at Whitehall Palace and Hampton Court. These performances were stripped of their elaborate scenery, focusing instead on the power of the rhetoric and the costumes, which were often donated by noble patrons.

5. Comparative Overview: Historical Performance Venues

Venue Name	Type	Estimated Capacity	Key Features	Significance to R&J
The Curtain	Public Amphitheatre	1,500 - 2,000	Oblong shape, Shoreditch location	Likely site of the 1597 premiere.
The Globe	Public Amphitheatre	3,000	Thrust stage, open roof, "Wooden O"	The primary home for major revivals.
Blackfriars	Private Indoor	600 - 800	Candlelight, seating for all, high ticket price	Enhanced the play"s intimate and nocturnal themes.
Whitehall Palace	Royal Court	Variable	Great Hall, aristocratic audience	Performances for Elizabeth I and James I.
The Theatre	Public Amphitheatre	2,000	First permanent playhouse	Possible early rehearsals or first drafts.

6. The Restoration and the 18th Century Shift

After the English Civil War and the reopening of theatres in 1660, *Romeo and Juliet* underwent significant changes. The venue shifted to the **Theatre Royal, Drury Lane** and **Covent Garden**. During this period, the "proscenium arch" was introduced, creating a "picture frame" effect that distanced the audience from the actors.

David Garrick’s Influence

In 1748, David Garrick staged a famous version at Drury Lane. He not only altered the text (allowing Romeo and Juliet to speak one last time in the tomb) but also introduced elaborate, realistic scenery. The performance was no longer about a bare stage and poetic description; it was about visual spectacle.

7. The Modern Era: From Broadway to Global Stages

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the answer to "where was it performed" expands to include every corner of the globe. From the **Stratford-upon-Avon** Royal Shakespeare Theatre to **Broadway’s Richard Rodgers Theatre**, the play has been reimagined in countless settings.

Site-Specific and Immersive Performance

Recent trends have seen *Romeo and Juliet*move back to its roots in unconventional spaces. Secret Cinema and other immersive companies have performed the play in abandoned warehouses, gardens, and even actual Italian villas in Verona. These "found spaces" echo the pre-1570s tradition of performing in whatever space was available.

8. Methodology: How Historians Trace Performance Locations

Tracing the exact performance history of a 400-year-old play requires a multi-disciplinary approach. Scholars use three primary methods:

1. Stationers" Register: Checking the records of the London company that regulated the printing industry. Publication dates often follow successful performance runs.
2. Account Books: Analyzing the "Henslowe’s Diary" and Master of the Revels accounts which list payments to

acting companies.

3. Topographical Analysis: Matching stage directions (e.g., "enter above") with the known architectural capabilities of venues like The Curtain or The Swan.

9. Common Pitfalls and Misconceptions

When researching where *Romeo and Juliet* was performed, avoid these common errors:

- The "Globe-Only" Fallacy: Many assume every Shakespeare play premiered at the Globe. Always check the play"s composition date against the Globe"s 1599 opening.
- The Verona Myth: While the play is set in Verona, there is no evidence Shakespeare ever visited Italy, let alone performed it there. The "Juliet’s Balcony" in Verona is a 20th-century tourist invention.
- Gender Roles: Remember that in all original Elizabethan venues, Juliet was performed by a young male actor, as women were legally barred from the stage.

10. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Understanding where *Romeo and Juliet*was performed offers more than just historical trivia; it provides insight into how the play"s themes of public versus private space, light versus dark, and youth versus authority were physically manifested on the stage. Whether in the muddy pits of Bankside or the gilded halls of a royal palace, the venues have always been as much a character in the play as the lovers themselves.

Tags: #shakespeare #theatre history #romeo and juliet #elizabethan drama #globe theatre #performing arts