

## Shakespeare's Actors



In Shakespeare's time, actors would have been part of a theatre company, performing shows around the country (sometimes even abroad), and would later on be based in specific theatres. These companies were supported by and usually named after a nobleman or even the monarch. Shakespeare's company, for example was known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, changing their name to the King's Men after James I's accession to the throne of England in 1603.

In England, women did not act until 1660, which meant that young boys, usually apprentice actors, played the female roles. Often, actors specialised in specific types of roles. For example, Shakespeare probably wrote the parts of Peter in *Romeo and Juliet* and Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* for William Kemp because he was known to be good at physical comedy. Shakespeare is said to have acted in his own plays, perhaps having played smaller roles like the ghost in *Hamlet*.

Unlike today when plays can be on the same stage for months at a time, theatres in Shakespeare's time rarely played the same play twice in the same week. Actors were not paid for rehearsals, and acting companies usually had a repertoire of around a dozen plays they could perform without much rehearsing. It is not known exactly how long Elizabethan actors rehearsed new plays, but it is believed to be between 1-3 days.

In the First Folio of Shakespeare's works, there is a list of 26 principal actors, including Shakespeare. This list does not mention the hired hands and the smaller roles, but it does give us a good idea of the variety of actors in the company and who they were. Some of the most famous among them were:



## Richard Burbage (1567-1619)

Considered one of the most famous actors of his time, most likely played all of Shakespeare's leading roles, such as Richard III, Hamlet, Othello and Lear. He was a shareholder in the Theatre and the Blackfriars theatre and from 1599 in the Globe theatre. When he was buried the engraving on his gravestone famously read 'Exit Burbage'.



## William Kempe (died 1603)

Famous for his jigs, some of which have survived today and carry his name, he was well known for playing comic characters. Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Peter in *Romco and Juliet* were potentially written especially for him. He left the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1599 to stage a 100-mile Morris dance from London to Norwich, and died in poverty in 1603.



## Robert Armin (1563-1615)

Following the departure of William Kempe in 1600, Armin became the leading comic actor for the Lord Chamberlain's Men. He typically played the 'intelligent' fools; Touchstone in *As You Like It* and the Fool in *King Lear*. Feste in *Twelfth Night* was most likely written for him.



## Nathan Field (1587-1620)

He started his career as a boy player with the Blackfriars boy company in 1600. He played in children's companies until the age of 26, and had joined the King's Men by 1616. He had a reputation for being a ladies' man: he left the King's Men in 1619 after a scandal over fathering a child with the Countess of Argyll. He died the following year.