

# A Brief History of Theatre Architecture and Stage Technology

ROP Stagehand Technician

2/4/10

# Lesson Objective

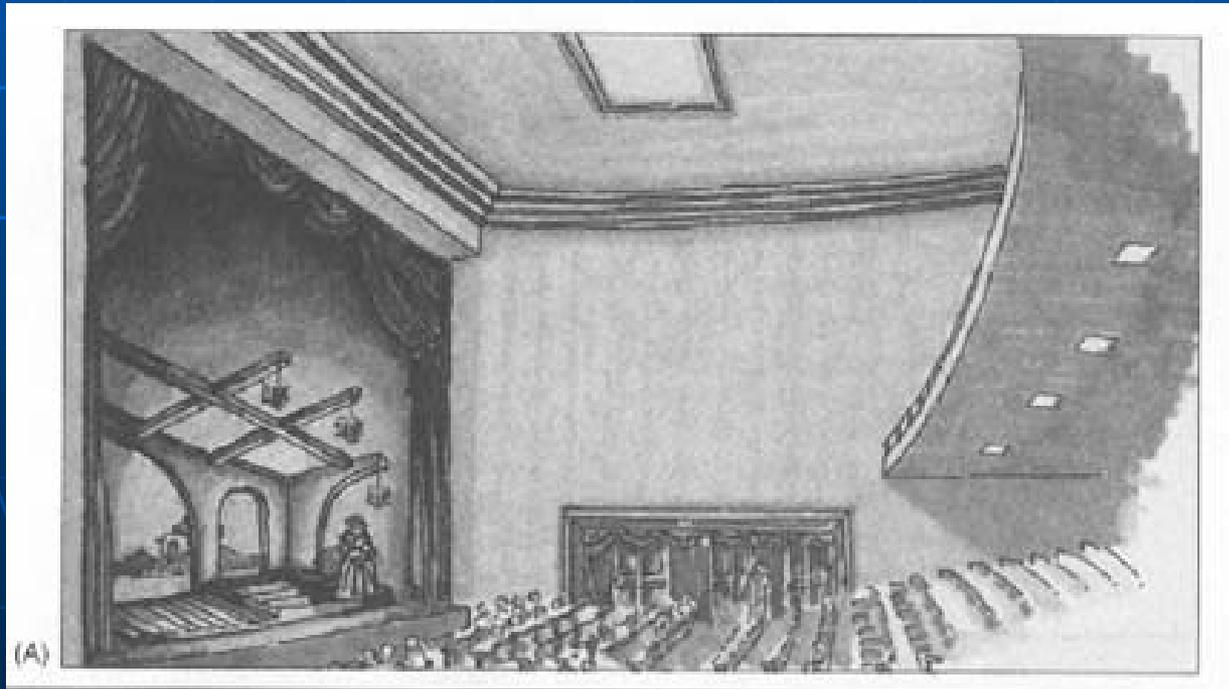
- To learn a concise chronology of the history of theatre architecture in order to understand why and how the functional design of the environment in which the play is produced is a major factor in determining the type, style, and design of technical elements used in a production.

# Lesson Objective

- Define key terms and identify key structural elements of theatres.
  - Some of these terms are no longer used, but some are still used today

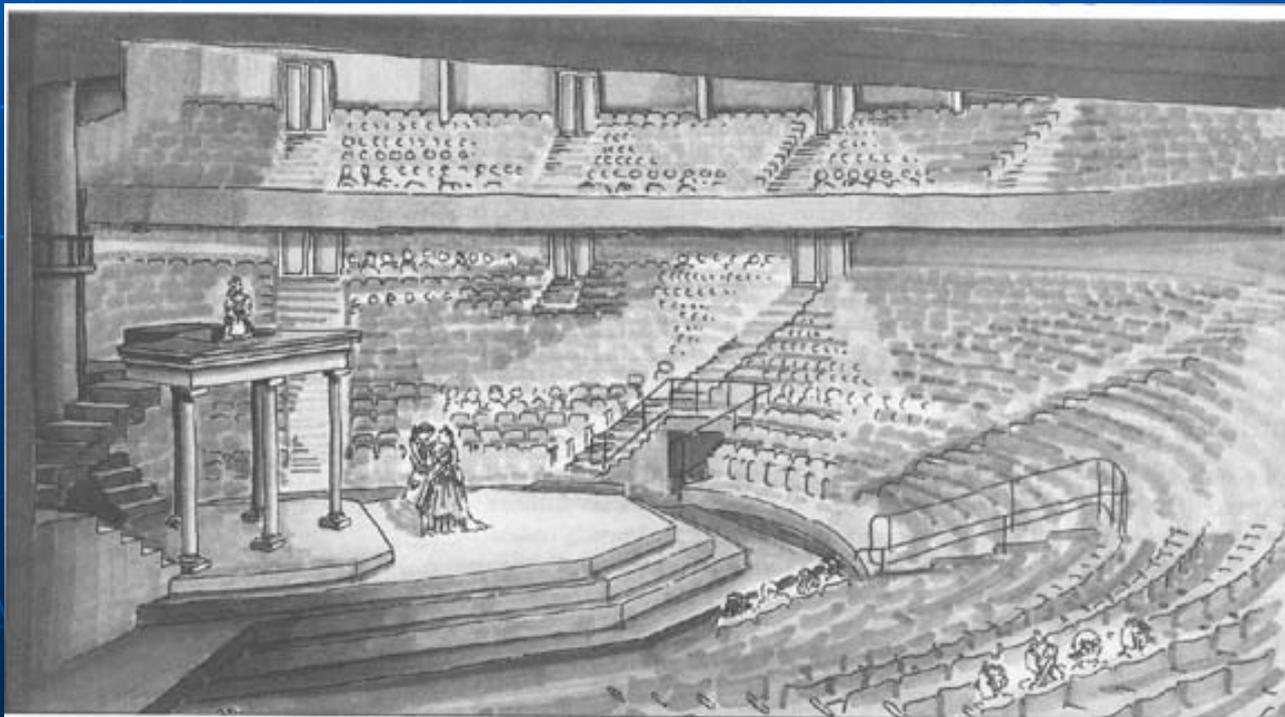
# Modern Theatre Spaces

- Proscenium- A stage configuration in which the spectators watch the action through a rectangular opening (the proscenium arch) that resembles a picture frame



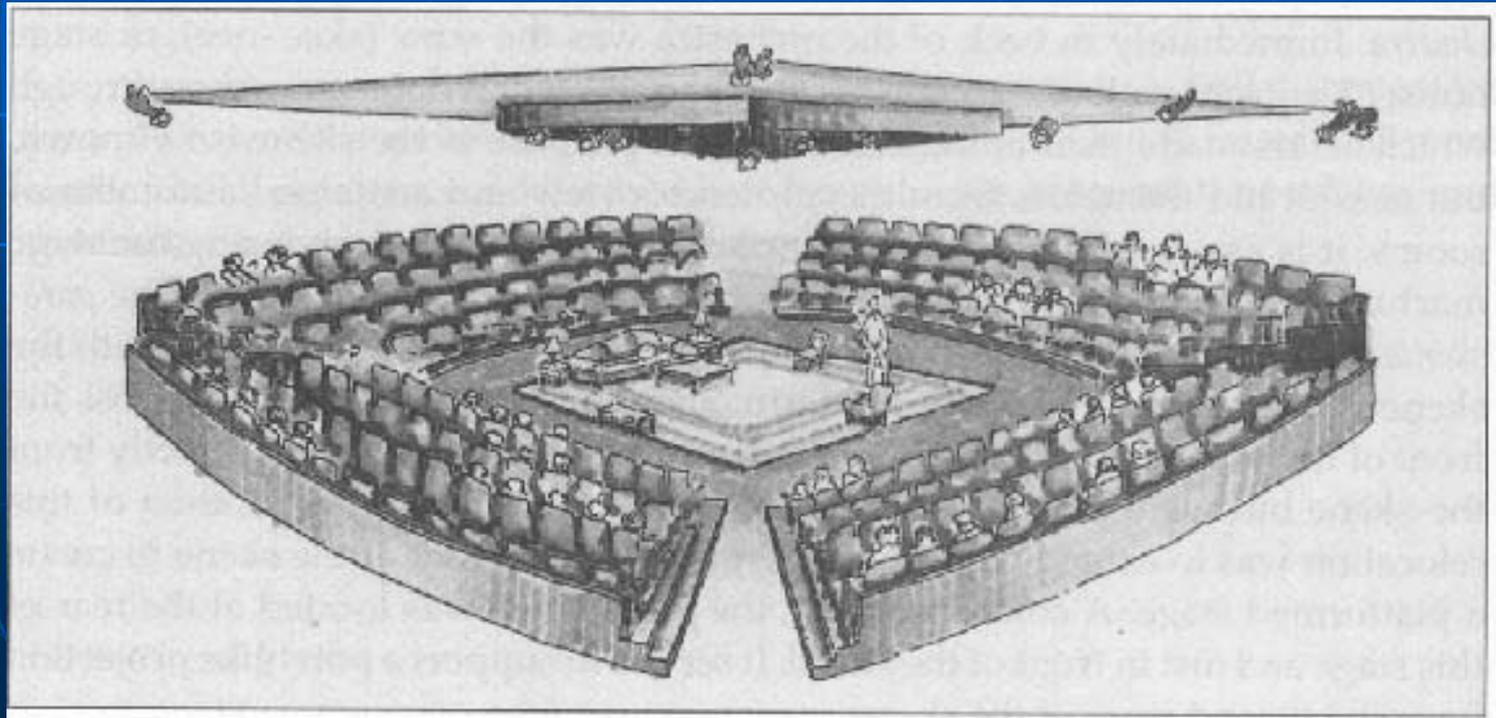
# Modern Theatre Spaces

- Thrust stage- a stage projecting into, and surrounded on 3 sides by the audience



# Modern Theatre Spaces

- Arena stage- a stage completely surrounded by the audience (aka theatre in the round)



# Greek Theatre

- Our knowledge of Greek or Roman Theatres is based on archaeological studies and educated guessing
- No single style or type, but a number of elements seem to be consistent
- Usually built on hillsides

# Common Architectural Elements of Greek Theatres

- Theatron= auditorium, where the audience sits
- Orchestra= circular playing area
- Skene= stage house, used for entrances/exits; dressing rooms, storage, etc.
- Parados= entrance/exit corridors



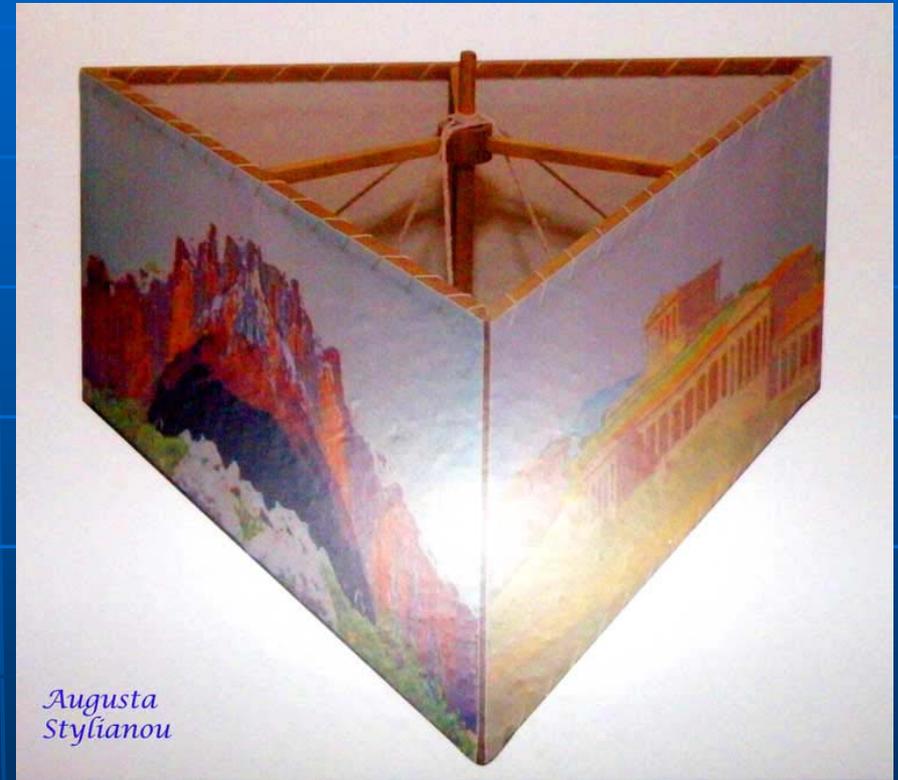






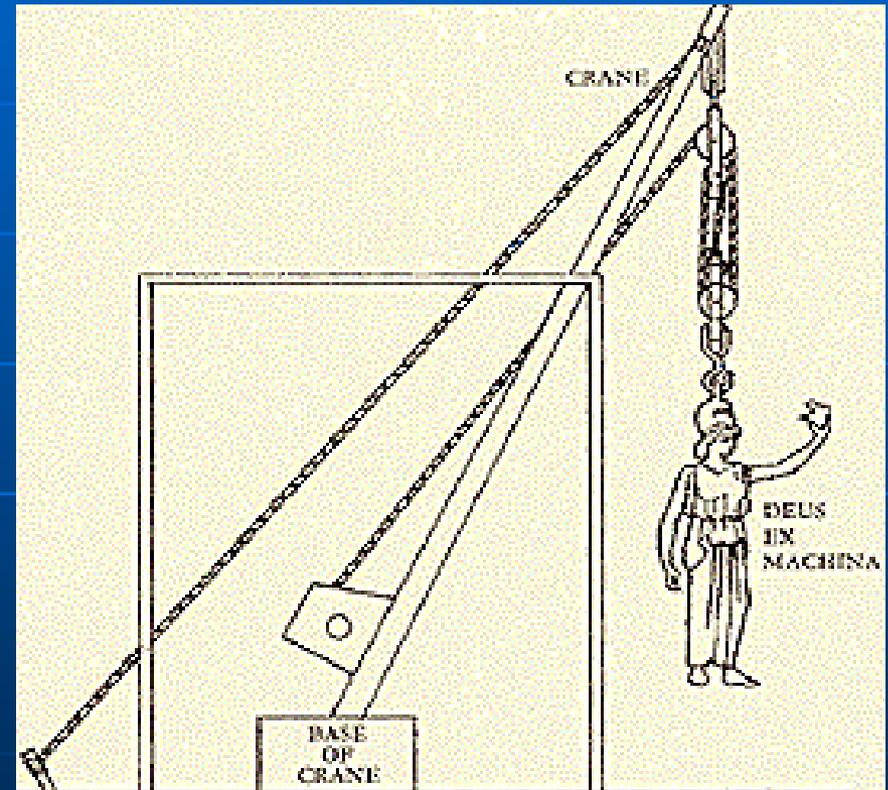
# Scenic Elements of Greek Theatre

- Eccyclema = wheeled platforms (aka wagons) to roll furniture or "dead" bodies onto stage
- Periaktoi = 3-sided pivoting scenery with a different location painted on each side



# Scenic Elements of Greek Theatre

- Basket or platform that moved up or down levels of the skene (machina)
- Painted panels similar to modern flats (pinakes)

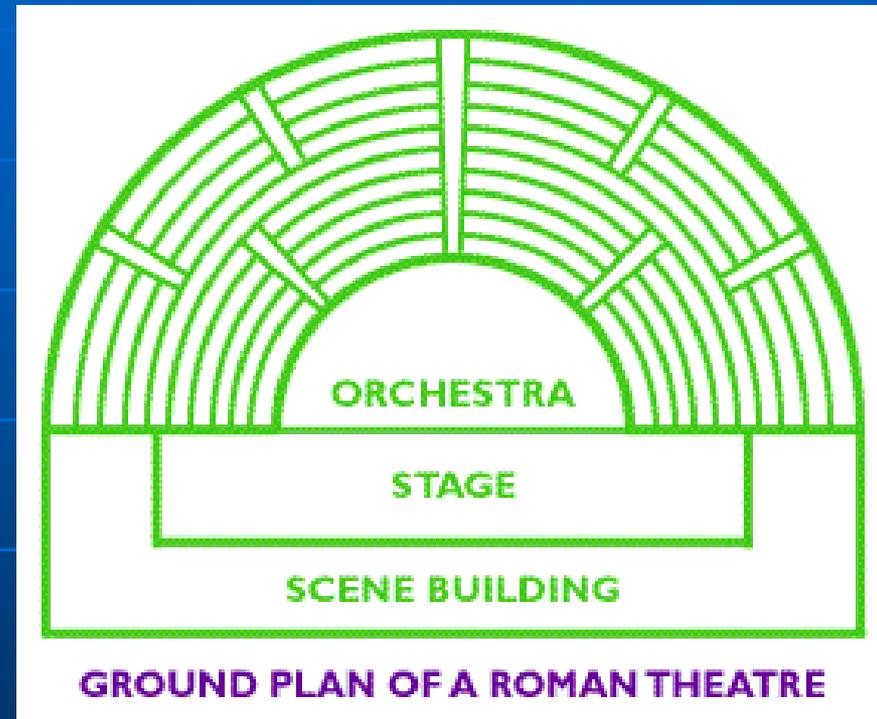


# Roman Theatre

- Simple modifications of the basic Greek designs
- Compressed the 3 separate elements (auditorium, stage, stage house) of Greek Theatres into one building
- Half-circle instead of  $\frac{3}{4}$  circle
- Built on level ground

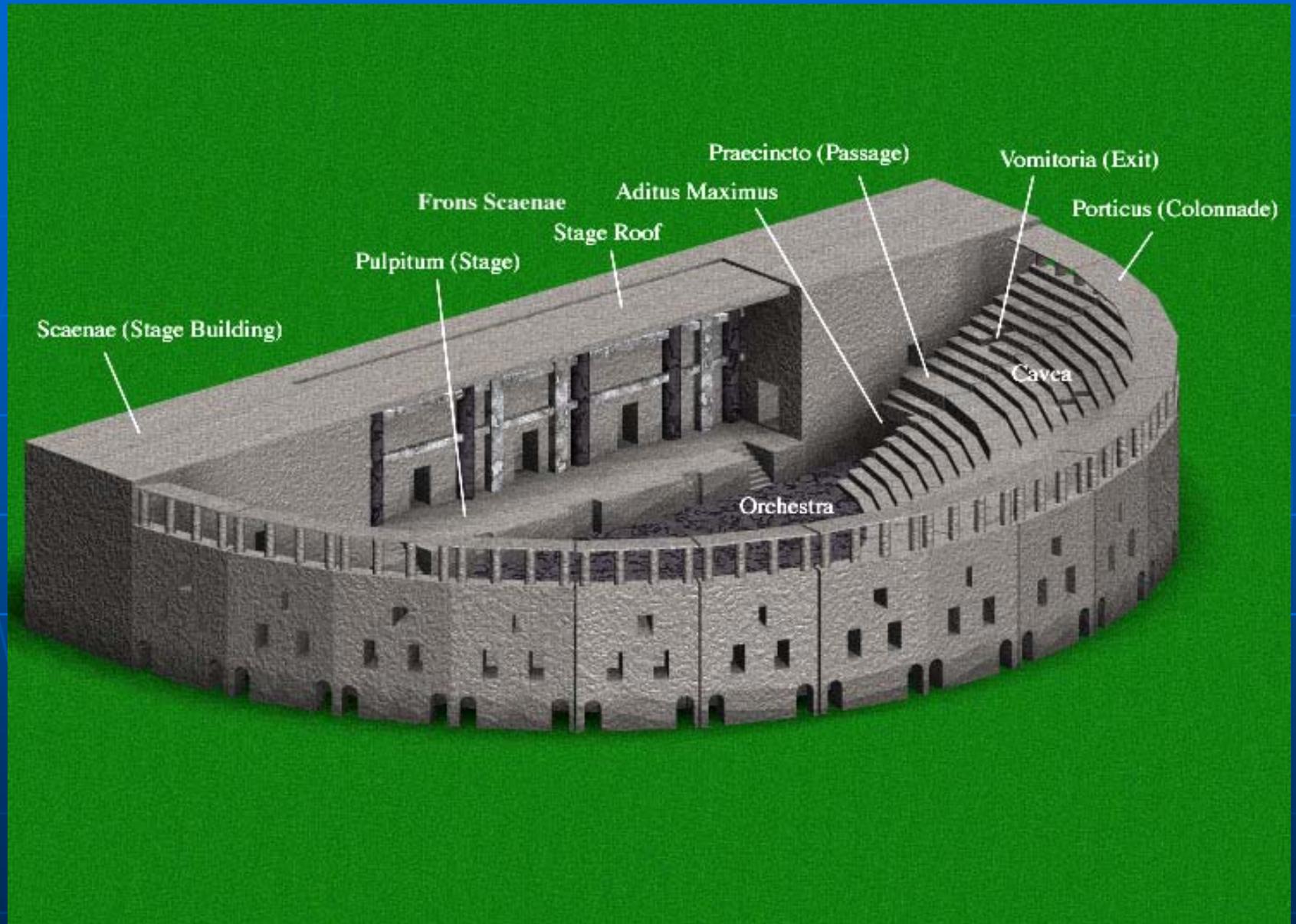
# Common Architectural Elements of Roman Theatre

- Cavea= auditorium, often separated from orchestra by short wall
- Scaenae frons= skene= stage house with an elaborately decorated single facade



# Common Architectural Elements of Roman Theatre

- Roof covering the stage from the scaenae frons to the edge of the proscenium
- Some had an awning that covered the entire seating area = Velum



# Scenic Elements of Roman Theatre

- Periaktoi were painted thematically to represent tragic, comic, and satiric scenes instead of locations
- Curtains were introduced by Romans
  - Auleum=Front curtain
    - lowered into a trough or slot in the floor or raised above the stage with ropes
  - Siparium= Back curtain
    - backdrop and a masking curtain

# Stage Technology of Roman Theatres

- Roman Amphitheatres, such as the Colosseum, used elevators, moving platforms, and trapdoors
- Complex moving scenery for dancing trees, rocks and other devices





**The Roman Theatre at Aspendos, Turkey - Photo: T. Hines 6/15/2003**

**(At the time of this photograph, the lower scaenae frons was blocked by scenery for the Aspendos International Opera Festival production of *Aida* )**

The skene, which is as high as the cavea, is made of regular blocks of conglomerate, except for window and door frames in limestone.

The scaenae frons has two levels, each with twenty free-standing columns arranged in squares of four around niches for statuary. The columns of the lower level are Ionic, while those of the upper level are Corinthian.



# The Fall of Rome

- AD 476- Theatres were abandoned
- For 500 years formal theatre was virtually dead
- Theatrical tradition was kept alive by bands of traveling entertainers, primarily actors and jugglers
- Performed secretly in courtyards, village squares, and temporary stage locations

# Medieval Theatre

- Church opposed secular drama
- *Yet*, Church was responsible for revival of theatre through dramatized biblical scenes used to better convey their lessons and doctrines
- When they became too complex they moved them outdoors

# Medieval Theatre

- Platform Stage-
  - built adjacent to the church and the audience stood in town square

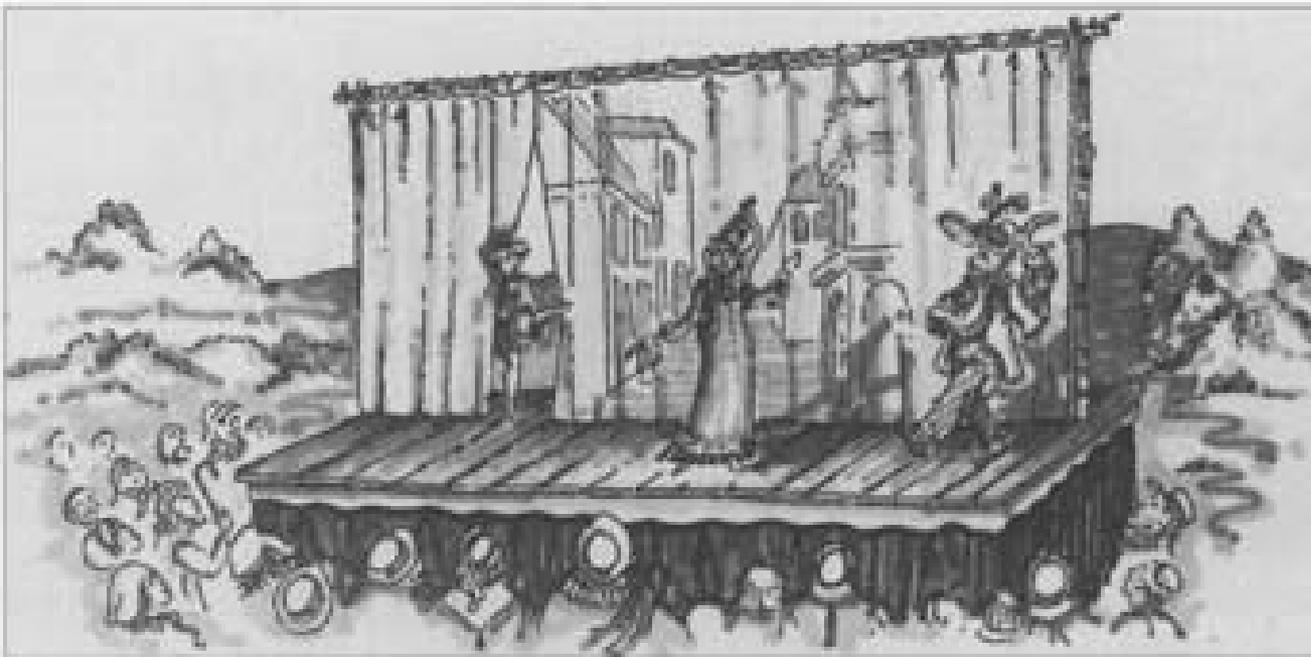
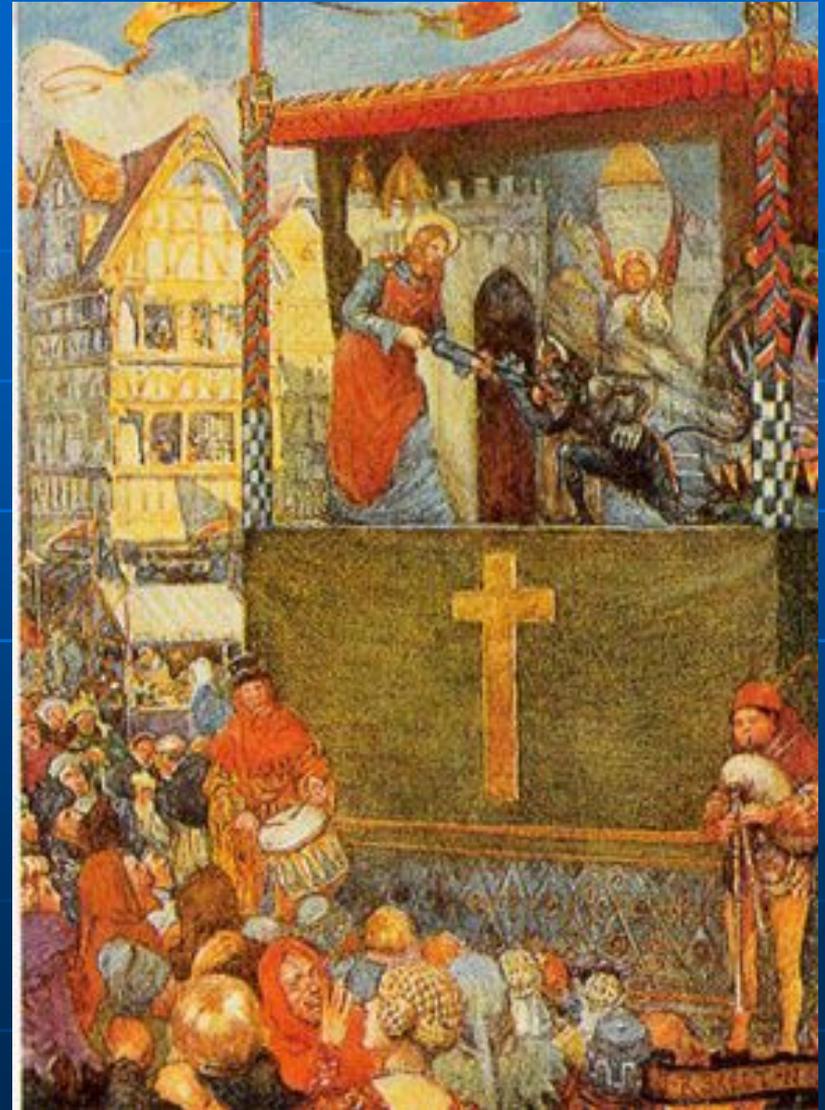


FIGURE 34  
A platform stage.

# Medieval Theatre

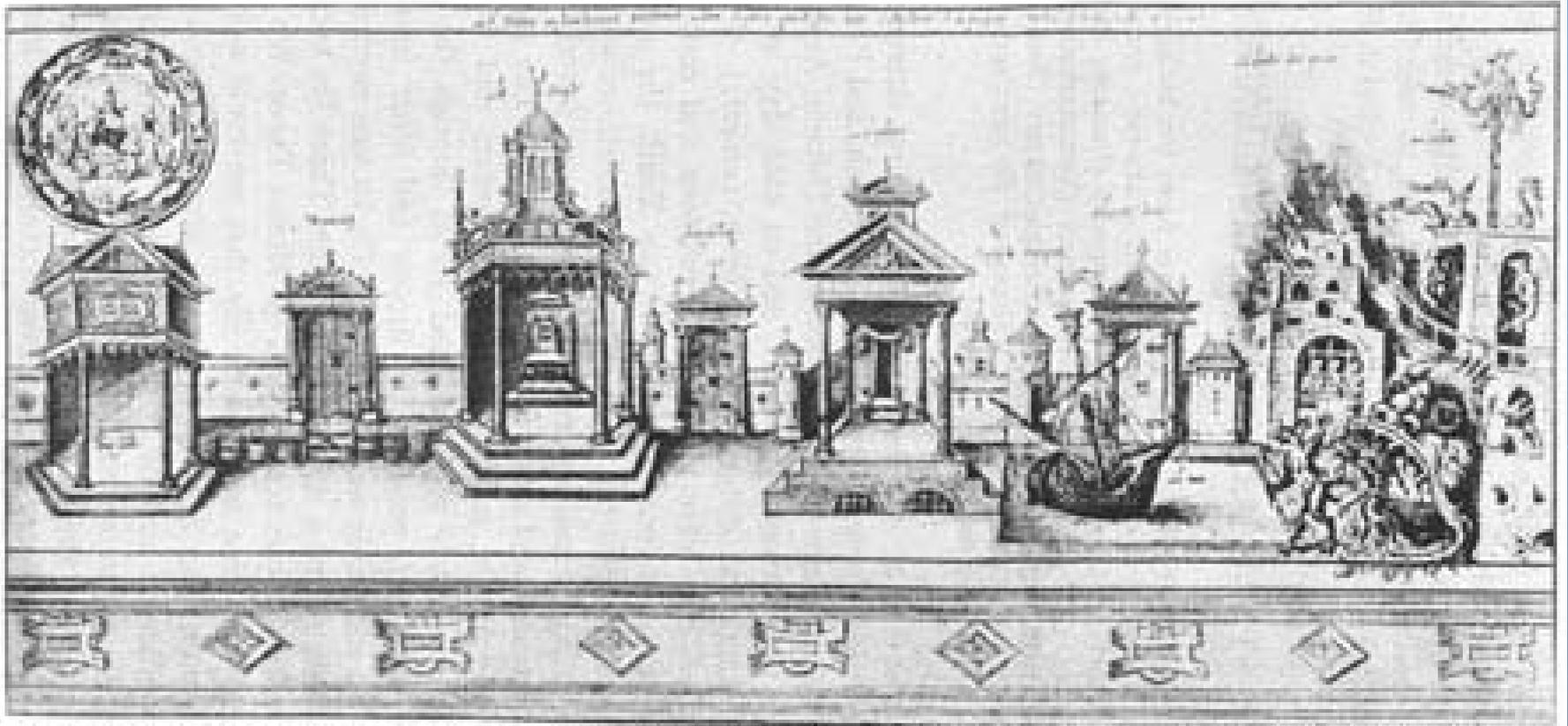
- Pageant Wagons
  - A platform stage on wheels
  - pulled from town to town



# Scenic Elements of Medieval Theatre

- Mansions (or stations)
  - Small buildings that depicted locations appropriate to the biblical stories dramatized in the productions
  - Heaven and hell were on opposite ends of the stage
- Platea
  - common playing area in front of mansions
- Secrets
  - stage machinery, trap doors, etc.

# Scenic Elements of Medieval Theatre



A 1547 Valenciennes set design showing Heaven (left), a Hell Mouth (right), and various places there between.

# 1500-1650

- Renaissance- cultural reawakening
- Theatres sprang up all over Europe
- Strong interest in classical forms and structures
  - Adopted basic shape of Greek and Roman theatres
  - Based on architectural writings of Vitruvius
  - With interesting and clever adaptations

# Architectural Elements of Renaissance Theatres

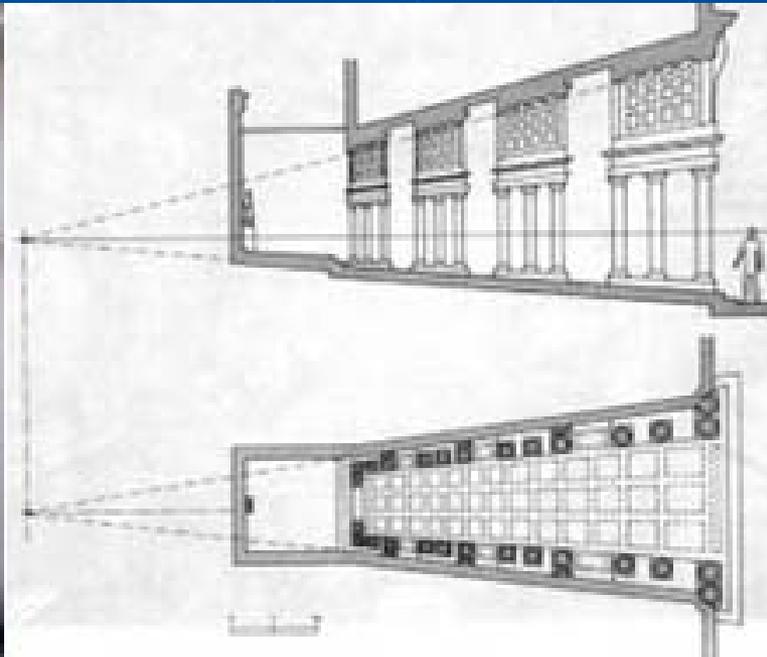
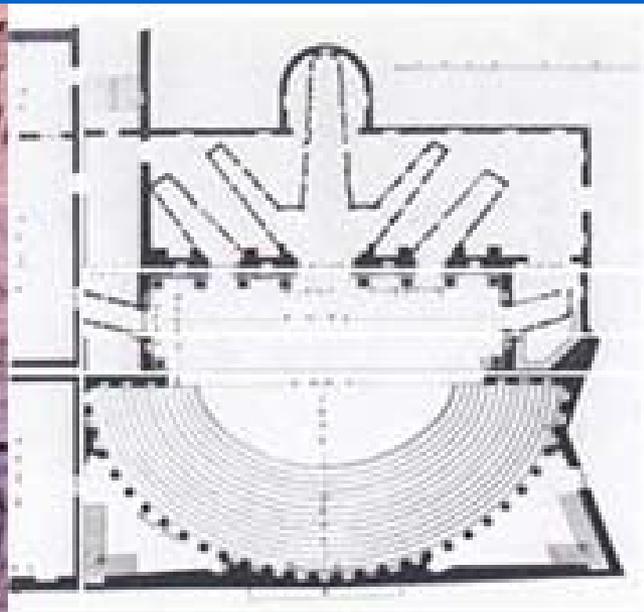
- Main difference=Indoor theatres
  - entire structure enclosed in one building
- Cavea was an ellipse instead of semi-circle
- Scanae frons was broken up by several arches instead being of a single wall



# Scenic Elements of Renaissance Theatres

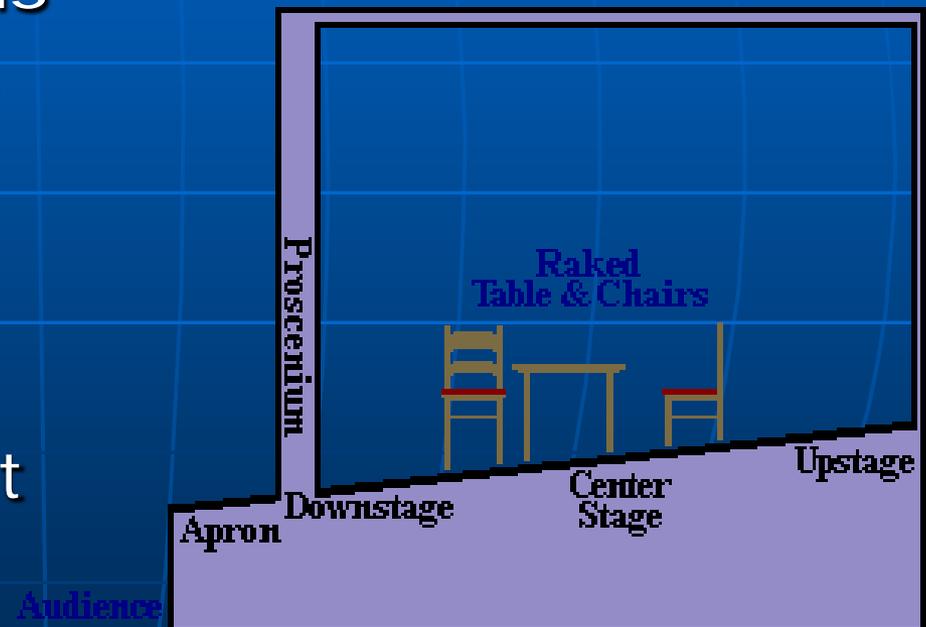
- Elaborate permanent sets of street scenes were built in forced perspective
  - A visual distortion technique that increases the apparent depth of an object





# Scenic Elements of Renaissance Theatres

- Raked stage  
behind the arches  
of the scaenae frons
  - a stage floor that is higher at the back than at the front
  - The actors performed on a flat playing area in front of the raked stage



# Scenic Elements of Renaissance Theatres

- Stock set
  - scenery designed to visually support a generalized location (garden, city street, palace, interior) rather than a specific one; commonly used from the Renaissance thru the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and still in use today in some theatres
- Drop
  - A large expanse of cloth, usually muslin or canvas, on which something (a landscape, sky, street, room) is painted



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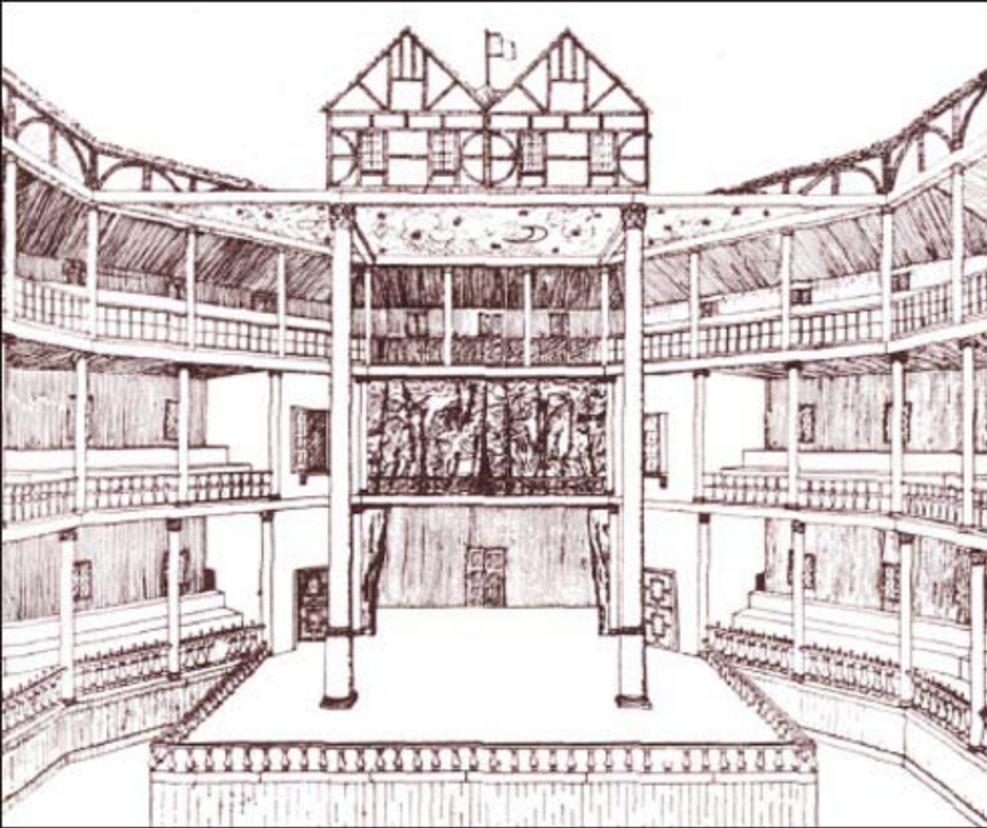
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# Scenic Elements of Renaissance Theatres

- First recorded stage lighting
- 1545, Sebastian Serlio recommended "placing candles and torches behind flasks with amber- and blue-colored water"

# Elizabethan Theatre

- A different type of structure
- A number of theatres had been built just outside London by 1600
- Including Shakespeare's Globe Theatre (1599-1632)
- Basic shape was similar, differed in details



# Architectural Elements of Elizabethan Theatres

- Large, open-air platform, generally raised 4-6 feet off the ground
- Surrounded by yard or pit where the lower class audience (aka groundlings) stand

# Architectural Elements of Elizabethan Theatres

- Stage House structure
  - Inner below- upstage of the platform- disputed structure- curtained alcove or roofed building
  - Inner above- would be a story above the inner below
- Surrounded by the outside of the building, a 3-story structure that housed galleries and private boxes for wealthier patrons and nobles

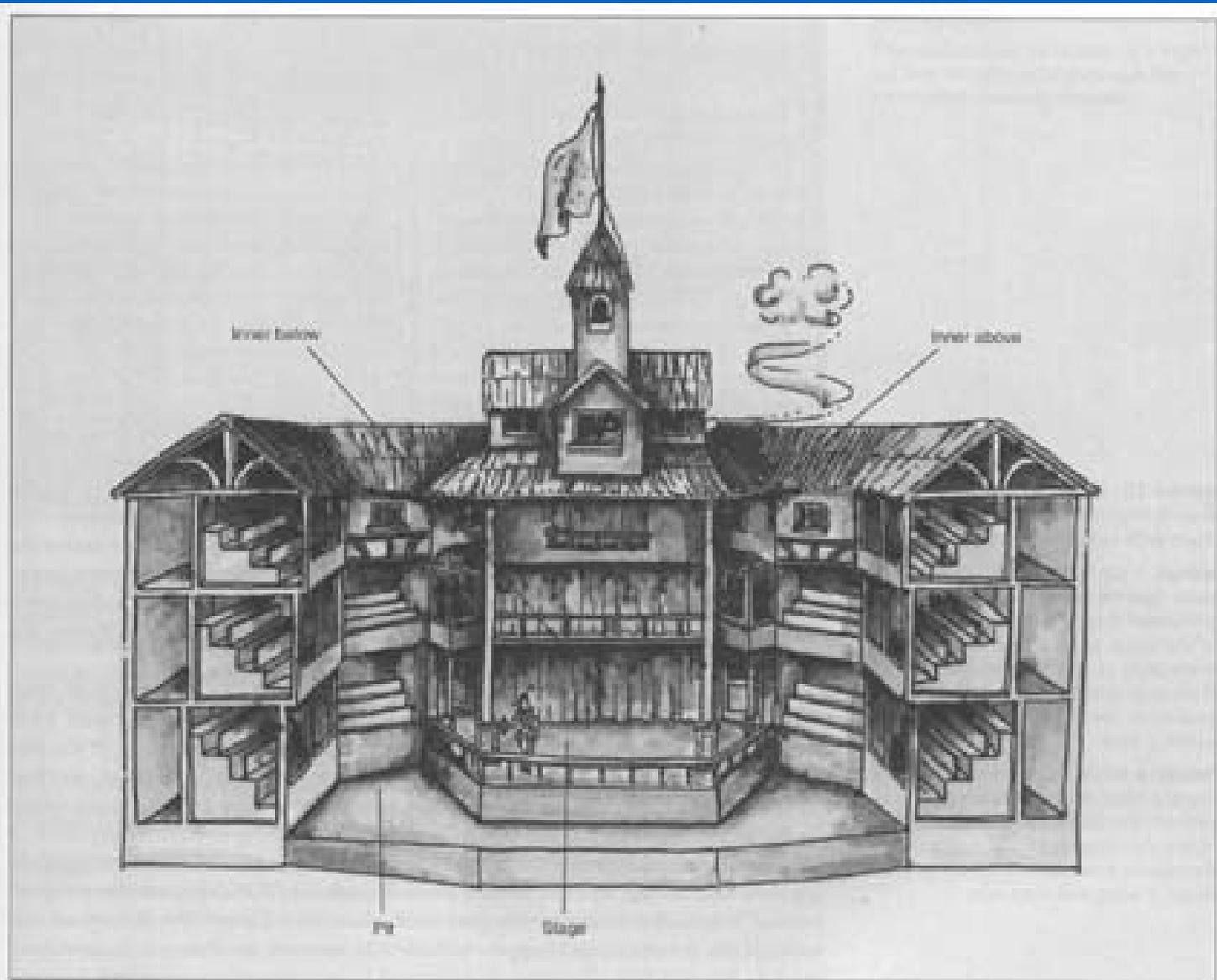


FIGURE 3.9  
The stage of the Globe Theatre.

theory to which you subscribe, the inner above was an area above the inner below.

# Scenic Elements of Elizabethan Theatres

- Little scenery was used besides the stage house
- Records indicate a number of props, rocks, trees, etc.
- Stage machinery did not evolve
  - Still used effects for flying gods, boats moving across stage, smoke, fire, clouds, and sound
- Candles and reflectors were used to light the stage so the audience could see the actors

# 1650-1900

- Theatres were primarily rectangular
- Stage set at one end of building
- Raked stage framed by proscenium arch and the apron thrust toward the auditorium
- Apron- the flat extension of the stage floor that projects from the proscenium arch towards the audience
  - Majority of action takes place

**FIGURE 3.10**  
A typical Restoration theatre.



# Scenic Elements of Theatres 1650-1900

- Continued as visual background for the play to take place in front of
- Painted in perspective on moveable drops, wings, and borders
- Raked stage added sense of depth

# Scenic Elements of Theatres 1650-1900

- Wings- (1) tall cloth covered frames or narrow, unframed drops placed on either side of the stage, parallel with the proscenium arch, to prevent the audience from seeing backstage; were usually painted to match the scene on the upstage drop. (2) The off-stage space adjacent to the stage in a proscenium arch theatre.

# Scenic Elements of Theatres 1650-1900

- Borders- Wide, short, framed or unframed cloth drops suspended to prevent the audience from seeing above the stage; normally match the decorative treatment of wings and drops in wing and drop sets

# Scenic Elements of Kabuki Theatres

- Japanese Kabuki Theatre
- 1763-Elevator trap
  - A small elevator used to shift small pieces of scenery, or an actor, from the basement underneath the stage to the stage or vice versa. Usually no larger than 4x4 or 4x6 feet. Also known as a disappearance trap.
- 1753-Elevator stage
  - A large elevator used to shift large scenic elements or whole sets between the area beneath the stage and the stage

# Scenic Elements of Kabuki Theatres

- 1758-Revolving stages
  - A large, circular disk that pivots on its central axis. Built into the stage floor as part of the theatre's permanent equipment.
- 1827-Concentric revolving stages
  - A revolving stage with, usually, 2 sections, one rotating inside the other

# Lighting in Theatres 1650-1900

- Gas Lighting- 1792
  - Brighter and cleaner burning than candles, easier to control intensity
- Limelight- 1816
  - A sharp jet of flame focused against a block of limestone, limestone incandesces, add mirrored reflector
- First electric light was the carbon arc
  - Produced when electricity arcs between 2 electrodes
- By 1860- Paris Opera
  - Projector, followspot and several effects using carbon arc
- Edison's incandescent lamp- 1879
  - By 1900 almost all theatres used electricity

# Twentieth Century

- More realistic and naturalistic type of drama
- As productions became more realistic, the shape of theatres changed to support this form
- Settings became environments for the plays rather than backgrounds
- Action of play moved from the apron to the stage, apron depth became shorter

# Twentieth Century

- The Little Theatre movement in the US, 1920-30s
  - Move away from Broadway for artists to hone their craft out of the critics' eye
- "Found" Spaces- intimacy with the audience
  - Existing barns, churches, feed stores, libraries, grocery stores
  - No proscenium arches- led to thrust and arena stages